

**THERE'S A PORPOISE
CLOSE BEHIND US**

By the Same Author

HOCUS FOCUS

CAGE ME A PEACOCK

THERE'S A PORPOISE CLOSE BEHIND US

BY
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'Will you walk a little faster?' said a whiting to a snail,
'There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on
} my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join
the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the
dance?'

LEWIS CARROLL
(*Alice in Wonderland*).

CHAPTER I

'Beginners, please'

IN the days when this book was still a snug conceit in the ether, awaiting conception via a Relief nib and a Woolworth writing-pad, ruled faint, I had other plans for it. It was to be a trumpeting bellow of indictment, a hurricane of exposure, a bombshell. And more: it was to be tinged with bitter, brittle wit and hard philosophy. Thumb on, and glance swiftly at its bulk. It was never meant to be that long. Three hundred pages take hell out of you. I defy any one to write three hundred pages of bitter, brittle wit. I defied my publisher, but he stuck to his point about wanting three hundred pages, and told me to look at James Agate's *Ego*.

Whimpering a little I consulted a friend of wisdom, Griffith Jones, who acts. He knows Diana Shand and Robin Gardner (who are the heroine and hero of this book) and gave me an ear attuned with sympathy and understanding.

'It is,' I said, 'not possible to write three hundred pages about the London theatre. Not without trickery. Two hundred pages would be more than ample, and that would take skilful padding.'

'Three hundred pages,' Jones gave answer, 'will flow like water from a duck's back once you get into the swing of the thing. Pause,' he exhorted. 'Consider. You can give a preliminary chapter to all the characters in the book. Quaint sayings when but children, and short biographies of early struggles. It's all in order.'

'This book,' I said, 'is about the theatre proper; tinged with bitter, brittle wit and hard philosophy.'

'Say that again,' said Griffith Jones, 'only slower.'

'This book,' I repeated courteously, 'is about——'

'You're sick,' he said firmly. 'That's what it is. Not well. You go away somewhere, quietly, and write a chapter about Diana Shand, then one about Robin Gardner,

then one about Douglas Middleton, and sew a button on the bitter, brittle wit. To hell with the bitter, brittle wit. Write a human drama, not a tract. Laughter and tears, heart throbs—that sort of thing. Easy as pinching the Crown Jewels. Go to it!’

‘That’s your advice?’ I said.

‘That,’ said Griffith Jones, ‘is my advice. And oh, how sound it is!’

I have told you, simply and without attempting to solicit pity, why there is no bitter, brittle wit or hard philosophy in this book.

On the other hand, there is great truth. Five people, all strangers to one another, have read this story. All five recognized Flossie Carter, and had been to one of his parties. In each case Flossie Carter was some one entirely different. I know no better way of convincing you that in this book is great truth. All the characters are imaginary, and have no relation to any living person. This is because there are so many living persons to choose from that I had no need to pick on any particular one, which would have been needlessly calling down the law of libel on my hearth, and the hearth of my publisher, and quite possibly the hearth of his printer.

Here, then, my masters, is the story of how Diana Shand and Robin Gardner became part of the London theatre, and the history behind the sensational riot on the first night of Robin Gardner’s play *Soft Laughter* which caused such a stir at the time, but has had no recording until now, when he and Diana are safely under contract in Hollywood.

CHAPTER II

Diana Shand

ON the eleventh of December, 1916, Mrs. Allenby Shand received a buff envelope from the War Office telling her that Captain Allenby Shand, while serving his country

gallantly and with heroism, had been killed in action on a turnip field in Flanders and recommended for a posthumous D.S.O.

On the twelfth of December, a little after three o'clock in the morning, and greatly helped by the District Nurse and the woman from next door, Diana Shand was born; and Mrs. Shand, feeling very rightly that the posthumous D.S.O. was not adequate compensation for a husband she had loved desperately, died while the District Nurse's back was turned for a moment.

Two newspapers commented on a sad loss to the London stage, and an elderly Miss Allenby who lived in Queen's Gate and believed herself to be a philanthropist, swooped down on the unresisting Diana and clapped her under her wing, diapers and all; and for ten years Diana stayed under her wing, in the house in Queen's Gate, and lived through it by a miracle. She was given, at the age of two, a cheap governess called Ida Rabinowitz, who, besides attending to Diana's education (which included airing her in the park regularly every afternoon, feeding her, bathing and putting her to bed, and then bathing and dressing her again the next morning) answered letters for Miss Allenby in her spare time, did the housekeeping when Miss Allenby was too busy (which happened regularly every time any housekeeping cropped up) and played Demon Patience with her every evening until forty-five minutes to twelve, during which time Miss Allenby cheated like a mad thing, and threatened a cut in wages the first and only time Miss Rabinowitz had been plucky enough to remark on it.

Now, Miss Allenby presided over the committee of a Society that worked painstakingly for the betterment of the African savage. Had the Society been larger and its influence more keenly felt in Africa, the African savage would undoubtedly have risen up and slaughtered the entire white population for miles around in retaliation; but almost uncannily the combined endeavours of the Committee and Miss Allenby every second Thursday from four to six (when Miss Allenby, never faltering, collected contributions, organized sewing-parties to make clothes for the savages and parties to raise enough money for the sewing-

party to make the clothes, and read papers to the Committee that had taken Miss Rabinowitz hours to prepare after the Demon (Patience) failed to spread farther afield than the Gloucester Road Tube Station.

However, the Society kept her posted with glowing reports from its African branches, neatly typed on the best foolscap, describing carefully how well the savages were reacting to the proceeds of her sewing-parties; and this quite understandably filled her with a happiness and a goodwill towards the savages that made her pour more and more of her private income into the Society, until the Society felt it was justified in moving into larger offices near the Temple, and took on three typists and an office-boy.

With age came a conviction, embedded in the very hub of Miss Allenby's soul, that it was to her and her alone that the African savage looked for support and guidance, and at last she left the Society all her worldly effects in a special will which Miss Rabinowitz read and had to put down and go hastily to the bathroom, where she was sick.

The thing, however, must be looked at without prejudice. Miss Allenby never for a moment expected the Society to benefit for at least another twenty years (making her ninety-one) by which time the colourless little Diana would be thirty and out in the world on her own—perhaps, who knew? working for the betterment of the African savage in Uganda or the Gold Coast.

One must blame the architect who designed Miss Allenby's house for putting an oval well to the staircase, if one is to blame at all; because unhappily for the colourless little Diana (and in a lesser way, for Miss Rabinowitz) Miss Allenby fell from the attic stairs to the basement while trying to open a jammed fan-light, and though Diana was not allowed to look, the noise Miss Allenby made when she hit the basement floor was loud enough for her to realize that her aunt would never pat her on the head in front of visitors again.

She was not conscious of any great loss, for never in her ten years had she received one word of real affection

or one caress that was not a formal gesture of feudal despotism, and more than once she had heard her father's marriage deeply lamented and his choice in women undergo heavy criticism. Mention of the theatre was forbidden in the house, so she never knew that her mother had been one of the more promising of the younger actresses before the War (though Miss Allenby had hinted that her mother's death was the work of a Divinity shaping every one's ends to good purpose).

.. When the will was read two days later, Miss Rabinowitz learned officially about the Society, which was represented by a fat man in funeral black, right down to the hem of his handkerchief and a ring under each eye, who surged with unwieldy elation and unconvincing compassion when he heard that neither she nor Diana was to receive anything at all. With commendable presence of mind she left the table before the lawyer had reached the three extra pages of conditions (none of which hampered the Society to any serious extent), left Diana to pack her wicker basket, and rifled Miss Allenby's trinket boxes and had gone systematically through the trunks in the attic before it had even entered the Secretary's head to provide against it. This resulted in two paste hatpins, a rolled-gold necklace with nine sovereigns threaded on it, a string of opals, a Kruger shilling, and a hair-tidy made of sea-shells. Miss Rabinowitz spoke ill of the dead, put the necklace round Diana's neck and the opals in her tooth-brush bag, and went back to deal with the lawyer, who had ideas on what should happen to Diana. The Secretary started a tour of reconnaissance, and Diana was left alone in the hall.

Between them Miss Rabinowitz and the lawyer unearthed in the dustier files of Miss Allenby's correspondence ('Jan. 1916—Feb. 1918, Private and Confid.') a letter from Mrs. Allenby Shand's brother, who was a parson in Nivenhurst, Sussex, wherein he offered his sister's child a home if Miss Allenby felt the encumbrance too heavy. Across it was written 'Presbyterian Papist!' by which they inferred that the Rev. Sharman Bannock had fared poorly in Miss Allenby's eyes, though he wrote on Church

of England notepaper, and told her he was her very obedient servant at the end.

The lawyer at once strengthened the Exhibition Road post office by one and ninepence, and the post-mistress at Nivenhurst had sent her second youngest round to the Vicarage with a buff envelope—running, in case the Vicar had been left money—less than two hours later. The lawyer had worded the telegram with such economy and efficiency, however, that no one at the Vicarage could understand what it meant until the verger arrived for tea, when he and Mrs. Bannock sorted the thing out like an anagram. Once it made sense the Rev. Sharman lost no time at all, and it was still light when Miss Rabinowitz took the answer in at the servants' entrance, and had whisked the bewildered Diana and her wicker basket out of the house in Queen's Gate and into a third-class compartment with two old men and a Parsee Medical Student in less time than it had taken Miss Allenby to make her last descent to the basement.

The train, wheezing brokenly, reached Nivenhurst station at eleven that night, and the Rev. Sharman and Mrs. Bannock were on the platform to meet it. Diana had been half asleep when Miss Rabinowitz bundled her on to the platform and rushed back for the luggage, but when Mrs. Bannock, after one glance of surprised pity, had swept her up in an embrace that was pleasantly like rolling on an eiderdown mattress, and kissed her on both cheeks, and shown her to the Rev. Sharman (who wiggled his fingers at her encouragingly and blinked), something new inside her suddenly came to life, and she buried her nose in Mrs. Bannock's feather boa (though it was pungent with camphor balls) and cried her little heart out; which was something Miss Rabinowitz had never seen her do before in her life.

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So, at ten, Diana began to find out why people liked being alive, and her arms and legs began to look more like arms and legs and less like matchsticks; and when

her cheeks were pink and her lips red, one saw that her eyes were blue and not dull grey; and when her hair was unplaited and snipped to where it reached her shoulders and combed out and brushed, one saw it was golden and not rich-mouse; and Mrs. Bannock went through her clothes and took most of the sleeves off above the elbow and cut off the buttoned collars and made her cotton knickers to replace the flannel ones (which went for dusters) and introduced her to dolls; and the Rev. Sharman hovered benignly in the background, where he wouldn't get under people's feet, and blinked amiably and kept saying how absurd it all was—she might be her mother all over again, there was so little to choose between them—absurd, the likeness, absurd—and invariably worked himself up into such a state of maudlin sentimentality that Mrs. Bannock had to shoo him off to his study to write something, to stop Diana from weeping out of pure sympathy.

It took three months for Diana to lose the deep-rooted conviction that it was all going to stop at any minute, and that one morning when she woke up she would find herself back in Queen's Gate.

She was on the top of a hill when it happened, with Miss Rabinowitz, and she flung out her arms at the sleek countryside and said quickly, 'I'm always going to be happy. I'm always going to be happy, for ever and ever, Miss Binnie, I just *know*!' And Miss Rabinowitz said, 'Why not, dear?' with her mind on other things, and Diana sat and gazed at the clouds, and was lost in the ecstasy of being happy until the wind nipped Miss Rabinowitz round the ankles and they went back for tea.

'I'm sure you'll get on *beautifully*, Diana,' Mrs. Bannock said contentedly, 'because every one always does with Garstin, and he isn't really so very much older.' She lifted the lid off the tea-pot and peered in vaguely. 'Another scone, I think. And this time to-morrow he'll be here. Won't it be nice?'

'Yes,' agreed Diana warmly, trying to remember what Mrs. Bannock had been talking about.

'And the way he's growing up!' Mrs. Bannock pro-

ceeded. 'I can never believe it's still my own son, after he's been away a term. He grows out of his clothes faster than I can buy them.'

Of course. Garstin. They talked a lot about Garstin, but Diana had never given him credit for being anything more than a word of seven letters with a photograph on the piano in a white collar; and now a man of fourteen was going to be in the house after to-morrow, and they were cousins, and every one got on beautifully with him.

The Rev. Sharman wondered if Mrs. Bannock could squeeze another drop out of the tea-pot, and Diana passed his cup up to Mrs. Bannock and applied herself to the question of cousins. The photograph on the piano was an old one, and Garstin at nine and Garstin at fourteen weren't going to be the same thing, because he was growing out of his clothes faster than Mrs. Bannock could buy them. From the general tone of conversation she gathered he was surpassingly handsome, was brilliant at his work, and exuded kindness to all living creatures. It seemed fairly certain that they would get on, for Diana had always managed to get on with the children in Hyde Park, so the approaching meeting gave her no qualms.

After tea she walked down to the village with the Rev. Sharman, and they saw two rabbits.

§

Garstin Bannock arrived home while Diana was out for her walk with Miss Rabinowitz, and the first sign of his presence was his travelling-trunk in the hall when they got back. A sudden excitement and anticipation accelerated Diana into the sitting-room, and lo! standing with his seat five inches off the fire, was Garstin Bannock, with the room to himself.

'Oh, hullo, Diana!' he said easily.

'Hullo!' said Diana, seized with swift embarrassment.

'Damn cold, out, isn't it? I'm darned nearly frozen.'

He wasn't handsome.

He wasn't even tall.

He wore glasses,

And he had spots.

And that was Garstin.

'You don't half stare at a fellow, do you?' he inquired after a pause.

'I'm sorry!' said Diana abjectly.

'S'all right. Mater's seeing about tea. I wish she'd get a jerk on. I've got a restive tape-worm demanding food.'

..He went up a little in her estimation at once.

.. 'Goodness!' said Diana, 'have you really?'

Garstin's brow clouded. 'Well, of course I haven't, fathead,' he returned with asperity. 'It was just a joke. I dare say you're too young to have a sense of humour, though.'

'That would be it,' Diana agreed humbly.

'I've got a very good one. The fellows at school seem to think so, anyway. I don't go in for girls much, myself. Have to watch your language so dam' carefully. I've got a fellow coming down for some of the vac. Decent guy called Middleton. He's older than I am, but there's no side about him. We're in the same form, of course.'

'How old is he?'

'Sixteen. That's pretty good, isn't it? Still, I'm only two months off fifteen, and I'm advanced for my age. I mean, the other fellows in the form are all about fifteen or sixteen. This chap Middleton's got hair on his chest—just in the middle. That's pretty grand, isn't it? On the chest, I mean.'

Diana thought it sounded awful, but spoke no word.

'You're small for eleven, aren't you?' he added, tilting his head critically on one side.

'I'm not eleven yet.'

'Ah, well,' said Garstin, and paused for a moment. 'You lived in London, didn't you?'

Diana said yes, she had.

'That must be grand. I wish I did. Middleton does. His people have got a house off Berkeley Square. That's Mayfair. You weren't in Mayfair, of course?'

'Queen's Gate.'

'Mayfair's where the Big Noises live. Middleton's people have got packets of cash. They come down to see him sometimes in a hell of a big closed-in car. I went out in it once. We had grub at a big hotel and drank beer.'

'Was it nice?'

'Beer? Nothing like it.'

'Do you drink it a lot?'

'Well, not a lot. Middleton does, as a matter of fact, but I'm not as keen on it as all that. Got a sweet tooth or something.'

'I like sherbet,' Diana offered.

'Pansy stuff,' said Garstin crushingly, and in came Mrs. Bannock with the tea.

It interested Diana enormously to watch Mrs. Bannock (clearly all a-swoon with pride and adoration) make a skittish attempt to be heavily playful with a son who put up with it in a detached manner, and never stopped eating when replying to the questions his mother peppered at him; because obviously Mrs. Bannock saw Garstin in terms quite foreign to every one else's, but much nicer, and it was the first time in her life that Diana realized that four people sitting round a table looking at a fifth all saw and heard a different person. It was amazing, too, that while she glowed when fussed over, Garstin obviously seethed with bitter resentment. Fancy sherbet being made out of pansies. They were talking about the famed Middleton, and Mrs. Bannock was expressing more pride in her son for having such an important friend, adding the hope that the house was presentable enough for him to come to, and Garstin rather abruptly repeated what Diana knew already: that Middleton had no side about him and would like the house.

The Rev. Sharman hardly said a word all through tea, except when badgered, and went to his study immediately afterwards, giving Diana the feeling that he was either disappointed about something or frightened of Garstin (who called him 'Padre' and made jokes about her verger), and when Mrs. Bannock suggested that Diana should go upstairs with Garstin and help him unpack, the better to get acquainted with each other, she had a

fleeting desire to go and sit with the Rev. Sharman in his study instead, but accompanied Garstin dutifully, and sat on the edge of the bed watching his every move and expression.

Garstin, provided his audience was mute, demanded little else of it, and talked more or less continuously as he unpacked, so that a strange new world began to unfold before Diana, in which fags, beaks, louts, stinks, grub, and lickings combined to make an unintelligible whole, governed, as it were, by Douglas Middleton; and out of the hotch-potch grew a sudden preconceived liking for Douglas Middleton. About a third of Garstin's language was Greek to her, and so his occasional halts and frowns at something let slip in the general flow passed over her head without leaving so much as a twinge of curiosity. She gathered, however, that he was warming towards her a little, and was appreciative.

Then a photograph was unearthed from below two Rugby jerseys and a pair of pyjamas done in a knot, and he ceased operations for a moment to point out fellows in his class, and Douglas Middleton in particular. It was a Rugby group, with Garstin standing at one side in civilian clothes holding a small flag on a stick; and right in the centre, sitting on a chair with the ball on his knees, his arms folded conqueringly across his chest and his cap rakishly over one ear, was Middleton, and he was *quite* beautiful.

Diana sat holding the photograph and gazing at him, enchanted, until Garstin twitched it away with an airy disregard for her higher flights of fancy, and fell to un-knotting three entangled boots.

'I hear you're going to school next year,' he remarked as he strove. 'Rum places, girls' schools. I always get a good laugh when I see them out in crocodiles with a couple of old cows widdling along behind like policemen. No freedom, like at men's schools. And I hear they get up to all sorts of things on the q.t. Middleton was chasing a girl in a school near ours, and he used to sneak out after lights-out in his running kit, and she used to sneak out and meet him in the garden. They got copped at it

in the end, but the old cow who caught them didn't know which school he was from, and the girl didn't bleat, so nothing happened.'

'Is that the school I'll go to?' Diana asked, a little fearfully.

'Shouldn't wonder. They'll probably send you where I'll have to keep an eye on you. I won't,' he added, 'but you needn't tell the mater. She'd only cluck.'

'Will I like it?'

Garstin shrugged indifferently. 'My good child,' he observed, 'you don't like or not like schools. You just put up with them. Middleton says so. It's all necessary. That's all you can say for it. The food's not as good as they give condemned men in prisons. Did you know, for instance, that a man who's going to be hung is allowed to choose whatever he wants for breakfast? It's a fact. You're sitting on some socks.'

In the week that elapsed before Middleton came down amongst the Bannocks, Diana and Garstin adapted themselves to each other as much as they considered necessary for company. Garstin was conscious of lowering himself a lot, and had a careful talk, while they were waiting for Middleton's train to arrive, wherein he explained that any advantage taken of his purely courteous attitude towards her in the presence of Middleton would be considered an abuse of privilege, as Middleton wouldn't understand it had been pure courtesy and would think he was sissy. Diana pledged herself not to impinge on him in any way whatsoever, and remained self-effacingly mute when the great Middleton climbed from his first-class carriage and greeted Garstin heartily but formally and called imperiously for porters.

The immediate effect of his arrival on Diana was to telescope Garstin down to a quarter of his former size and show up his glasses and spots in a hard light; and Garstin, seeming to feel it himself, was almost as humble to the Middleton as Diana had been to him. He explained

who Diana was as soon as possible, in a slightly apologetic voice, as one who disclaimed any responsibility for her being on the platform; but the great Middleton was gallantry itself, and passed on a tin of Mackintosh's toffee to her with a brief benediction.

They walked back through the village, taking it in turns to carry the luggage, and Garstin punctuated the conversation with heavily flippant apologies for not having a car, for not having a better village, for not bringing some one to carry the luggage, and for living in the country, until Diana was sure that the Middleton's lip must be curling with scorn; but whenever she darted a quick look at him out of the corner of her eye, his face was bland and benign, so she decided at last that every one must treat him like that, and it wasn't just Garstin making a fool of himself.

He was better than his photograph, because the photograph didn't show his long curling lashes, like a deer's, or the soft look in his eyes, or the transparent clear skin, and the way his nostrils quivered.

The talk was beyond her, dealing mostly with five thousand pounds that Middleton's father had put into a play, and how Middleton had been to rehearsals and kissed the leading lady, who knew his father quite well; and how when he left school and came into his money he was going to put plays on and get to know leading ladies as efficiently as his father had; and Garstin put forward the point that it would be a pretty good idea if he acted in plays himself, as he looked all right, and that was all it needed.

True to her promise, she kept well in the background the rest of the day, though Middleton occasionally threw her a kind word in passing. It struck her that things were going to be a little lonely from now on, for she was seeing less (and the Nivenhurst greengrocer more) of Miss Rabinowitz every day, and Mrs. Bannock was always so busy helping the maids or reminding the Rev. Sharman about something urgent that she had hardly any time for Diana at all.

And how lovely the Middleton was. He made her

feel excited just to look at him; just sitting there and talking to every one so smoothly and easily and knowing he was being admired and liked.

She had never heard theatre talk before, either, and it drew her strangely, as if Middleton were awakening some faint but very real corner of her mind that she had never bothered to investigate before. She edged a little closer to him, which he failed to notice, and gazed at him with an unflinching raptness that seemed to irritate Garstin a lot. He scowled meaningly once or twice, but she was too far off to kick on the shin, and at last the Middleton, pausing for effect, looked down at her and received the unflinching raptness full on.

'This must be very dull for you,' he remarked with nice condescension.

'Oh,' said Diana in a whisper, 'oh *no*! Oh *no*!'

Mrs. Bannock looked up from her sewing and beamed. 'Her mother was quite a famous actress, you know, Douglas,' she said helpfully. 'Quite a famous actress, before she married. She gave it up, you know, when she married, which I thought quite wise; but she was quite a famous actress in her time. She once acted with Sir Herbert Tree, when she was quite young. Lily Evans, she used to be, before she married.'

'Good Lord!' said Middleton in real surprise. 'And Diana's her daughter? Lily Evans? Good Lord!' He looked at Diana, for the first time, with undisguised admiration. 'I say, it's incredible! The pater knew Lily Evans terribly well! I've heard him talk about her.'

'Well, that's her daughter sitting down there in front of you,' said Mrs. Bannock, as if she had engineered the whole thing and wanted credit for it, 'and we've photographs of her mother upstairs in the drawing-room, in an album when she wasn't any older than Diana is now, and the likeness is quite absurd, as my husband has said over and over again.'

'But, good Lord!' said Middleton. 'I mean, it's amazing, isn't it? Garstin, do you mean to say I've known you all this time and you never told me!'

'I didn't think you'd be interested,' said Garstin dourly. 'I wasn't.'

'Not interested!' said Middleton warmly. 'Not interested! My hat, I like that! You've heard me talk about Lily Evans. Hundreds of times!'

'Never once,' Garstin returned, now quite white with jealousy. 'And how was I to know it was the same one?'

Middleton turned back to Diana. 'D'you know, I once saw her? When I was a kid of about four, she came to tea with the mater. I don't remember her much, but the pater's always said that if she hadn't left the stage she'd be the biggest star in London to-day. He said her marriage was the biggest——' he broke off gracefully and switched to another approach. 'He knows what he's talking about, the pater. He backs plays. I suppose you want to go on the stage too, don't you?'

'Yes!' said Diana urgently, though it conveyed hardly anything at all. 'Yes!'

Mrs. Bannock was greatly surprised, but laughed politely. 'You're a little young to worry about it yet,' she reasoned. 'It isn't what I'd call a *safe* occupation, Douglas, to suggest to people.'

'It is if you've got it born in you,' Middleton insisted. 'It's only people who try to act because it's less work and more money than other jobs that don't get far—and amateurs, of course—but it'd be different for some one whose mother had been a really good actress.'

'I'm sick of talking about the theatre,' Garstin put in, aggrieved; 'and it's Diana's bed-time.'

'Please, Aunt, can I stay up?' said Diana at once.

Mrs. Bannock looked at the clock carefully and pursed her lips.

'That clock's slow,' added Garstin viciously. 'The Padre said so at supper.'

'How slow?' asked Mrs. Bannock trustfully.

'Ten minutes.' He and Diana glared at each other ingrily.

'Then,' said Mrs. Bannock, 'perhaps, dear, you'd better run along.' The theatre talk had unsteadied her

calm a little. 'I'll come up and tuck you in when you've had your bath; there's a good girl now.'

Diana rose to her feet obediently, but with secret fury, said her 'Good-nights,' and departed in search of the Rev. Sharman, leaving her heart with Middleton.

The Rev. Sharman was in his study struggling with a sermon when she tiptoed in, but he put his pen down and leaned back when he saw her, and waved his fingers at her affectionately.

'Well?' he inquired fatuously. 'Not going to bed?'

'Yes, Uncle Sharman. Uncle Sharman, could I please talk to you about something first?'

'Certainly,' said the Rev. Sharman. 'Certainly, certainly. What something?'

'The theatre.'

The Rev. Sharman's eyebrows twitched slightly and fell back passive.

'I don't know much about the theatre,' he pointed out, 'beyond seeing *Charley's Aunt*, which was a long time ago, though comical.'

'Uncle Sharman,' said Diana, 'could I be an actress?'

'Good heavens!' said the Rev. Sharman. 'Why do you want to be an actress?'

'Because Mother was a very good one. Middleton met her once.'

The Rev. Sharman gazed at her helplessly for a moment, and then scratched the side of his head.

'I don't suppose there's any reason why not,' he said at last, 'if you think you'd like it. I wouldn't, if I were you; but that's neither here nor there. You'd far better speak to your aunt about it. Not that there isn't plenty of time ahead to make up your mind in. That young Middleton,' he added, more to himself. '*Tst—tst—tst.*'

Diana's eyes opened wide.

'Uncle Sharman—you do *like* the Middleton, don't you?' she asked searchingly.

'Why, yes—yes. Why not?' said the Rev. Sharman a little confused.

'Then why did you go *tst—tst—tst*?'

'I wasn't aware that I did.'

'He' *quite* wonderful, isn't he, Uncle Sharman? And so very, very pretty.'

'I can't have been aware of that either.'

She put her arms round his neck and gazed at him earnestly.

'You *don't* like him at all really; do you?' she asked accusingly.

The Rev. Sharman gazed back mildly, but avoided her question.

'What nonsense!' he said. 'I know a little girl who's very sleepy, and I think I'll have to carry her to bed.'

'Like a horse?' demanded Diana with enthusiasm.

'If my old bones'll stand it.'

'I shall like that,' she assured him cordially. 'Stand still while I get on, though, because last time you forgot in the middle and walked away, and I nearly fell off the chair. And stop by the linen-cupboard, because it's new pyjamas to-night, and I bet Miss Binny forgot.'

When Miss Rabinowitz had tucked her into bed and gone down to tell Mrs. Bannock it was time to go up and say good-night, Diana went over the Middleton's enthusiastic pean of praise and his remarks about going on the stage. To-morrow she would entice him away from Garstin for a few minutes, and persuade him to talk about Lily Evans and going on the stage a lot more, and what one had to do when one had finally got on to the stage to ensure one remained there. Mrs. Bannock arrived at this juncture and made a show of re-tucking her in, kissed her and asked God to bless her, switched out the light, and went into the room next door to make sure the spare-bed was properly aired for the Middleton, and Diana could hear her moving about.

For a while she tried conscientiously to go to sleep, but the new mysterious unrest sown in her bosom by the Middleton kept her mind pattering away like a small dynamo, and she lay staring up at the ceiling for hours and wriggled her toes slowly, as if she were playing an imaginary piano with them, which often helped when sleep was hard to woo.

The clock at the bottom of the stairs struck half-past something very late, and she heard muffled bumps and murmurs downstairs which meant the others would be going to bed almost any time now. Quite soon the lovely Middleton would be in the very next room, going to bed just like an ordinary person, and probably brushing his teeth first, like she had to.

Lily Evans.

'He said her marriage was the biggest——'

The Middleton's father had said her mother's marriage was the biggest——

Diana saw a colossal wedding-cake towering up to the ceiling, covered-in-cotton-wool Father Christmases and paper lanterns; and tea-cups the size of sugar-bowls set out along the table, with crackers beside them, four or five to each person, who would be allowed to pull them by themselves if they wanted to, because it was the biggest wedding that had ever happened, and all the guests were actors and actresses, though not as good as Lily Evans, who wasn't going to act any more owing to getting married.

'Good-nights' were being said out in the passage, and then she heard the next-room door being opened and the light being switched on, and Garstin's voice (which always had an unconvincing ring of importance when directed at the Middleton) asking if everything was all right, old man, to which Middleton replied that it was, whereupon Garstin wished him a gruff and offhand 'Good-night' and departed down the passage to the other wing, where he and the Rev. Sharman and Mrs. Bannock had bedrooms. (Miss Rabinowitz was on the floor above with the two maids, though in separate rooms.)

Fascinated, Diana lay and listened to the Middleton moving about and clicking open his suitcase, and dropping his shoes on the floor and clanking the willow-pattern wash-jug against the basin and whistling quietly to himself, and found it all most soothing and pleasant, so that at last a belated drowsiness began to steal over her and she closed her eyes. The last thing she heard was the squeaky crunch of the wire spring in the Middleton's bed as he rolled into it.

She was not conscious of having slept long when she suddenly woke up. The room was still dark, and the crack of moonlight from the window was very nearly in the same place as it had been before she fell asleep—a little to the left of the Infant Samuel over the chest of drawers. There was no sound from the next room—not even snoring, which in any case wasn't to be expected—and as Diana was not in the habit of waking up in the middle of the night for no reason at all, she was puzzled for a moment, and a little frightened.

There wasn't a sound from outside—not even a rustle from the trees at the top of the terrace, and not a sound from inside the house either, except silly little clicks from the floorboards every now and again, which one could only hear in the dark and had been carefully explained away by Miss Rabinowitz.

She turned over on to the other side, very carefully so as not to wake the Middleton, for her bed crunched too when moved on quickly; and tried to go back to sleep. Wriggling her toes silently failed to have any effect, so she stopped after a while, and began repeating over without a break:

*'Cock Robin is dead and lies in his grave.
H'mm-ba, lies in his grave.'*

which, like the toe-wriggling, had been known to work on occasion. Somewhere near the fourteenth *H'mm-ba*, she stopped and held her breath.

There was some one out in the passage.

Burglars!

Captain Hook and Smee!

Bogies!

A board creaked under a stealthy tread. Diana had to let her breath go unwillingly to stop her ears singing, and her heart began to hammer.

Then she heard the handle of the next room being turned with exquisite care.

Whoever it was was going to murder the Middleton for being so beautiful. She must do something to warn

him. She must scream. The house must be roused—at once, at once. She tried. Her mouth was quite dried up and no noise came. Middleton was as good as dead, and it'd probably be her next. She tried again.

Absolutely no result.

Then she heard Garstin's hoarse whisper : ' Middleton ! Are you asleep ? '

The sudden relief was quite agonizing.

She heard the Middleton's bed creak and his voice' whisper back, but not loud enough for her to hear what he said, though it sounded like a warning to Garstin, because the next time he whispered it was lower than the Middleton's, and she could only just hear the hiss he made. An acute curiosity sat up and demanded explanations as to why Gaustin was creeping about the house frightening people in the middle of the night and waking up the poor Middleton when he was trying to get a wink of sleep.

There were a lot of whisperings going on now, and the spring creaked again, which meant that Garstin was sitting on the edge of the bed. She wished she could go in and whisper too—the Middleton wouldn't mind at all, she felt sure—but Garstin would probably mind a great deal and get jealous again, like he did when the Middleton found out about her mother. The spring suddenly creaked again, quite loudly this time, but with a long silence afterwards to make up for it. That must be Middleton sitting up in bed to talk better.

Poor Middleton, being woken up when he was asleep, just to talk. They were talking quite hard now, though much too quietly for her to hear anything except the spring, which kept on creaking, more often now.

Then her ear caught something else—some one was out in the passage again, and not Garstin this time. It was a much clumsier some one, too, though he was obviously trying to make as little noise as possible.

It was no good trying that scream again after failing at it twice. She cowered down in the pillow, resigned to doom. The next room door was flung open suddenly and the light switched on.

Diana set her teeth and waited for a gun to bang.

There was no gun.

Instead, there was a pause, and then she heard the Rev. Sharman say, quite quietly: 'Go back to your room,' and there was another pause, and then the spring creaking again, and the sound of some one getting into something like a dressing-gown, and then footsteps which were obviously Garstin's going out of the room and disappearing down the passage; and then the Rev. Sharman spoke again. 'I think,' he said, 'that a train leaves for London about eight-thirty. I'll tell the maid to call you in good time.'

And when she woke up the next morning it was a quarter to nine, so she never saw the Middleton go, and Miss Rabinowitz when questioned displayed an unusual lack of ability to explain why they had let her oversleep. In return she refrained from sharing with Miss Rabinowitz the excitements of the night before, and pretended that she had heard nothing when Mrs. Bannock asked her rather timidly how she had slept.

Garstin, later, proved even less communicative. She noticed that he had recently been weeping, and seemed not to want to sit down a great deal, and his sulks were tremendous to behold.

§

Although the Middleton was wrenched out of her life so abruptly, his teachings remained and bore fruit. The desire to become an actress stayed with Diana loyally through the depressing hiatus in her life caused by eight years at a boarding-school and one more in Switzerland at a finishing-school run by a Franco-Swiss matron with a military moustache.

Aged nineteen, she arrived home, schooled and finished in the best tradition, to discuss the question of a career with the Rev. Sharman (now short-sighted) and Mrs. Bannock. Garstin, incidentally, had been down from Oxford two years with something reasonably praiseworthy in the way of a Degree, and had been taken on to

a weekly paper in Fleet Street through knowing the proprietor's son at Oxford and making proper use of it. They had not seen each other for the two years, not that either minded; and Diana was made to read two brief articles, without a signature, which Mrs. Bannock proudly flourished as Garstin's handiwork.

They sat in the garden as it was summer, and under the trees as it was hot, and began the subject of the career after a little conventional skirting and one or two side issues, such as Garstin's articles.

Roughly the sides were divided even—Miss Rabinowitz for Diana against all-comers, the Bannocks opposed to the theatre on principle. To bring home this point, the Rev. Sharman, as one by duty bound, read to Diana a passage from a book.

'It is nearly impossible,' insisted the book, 'for a woman to remain pure who adopts the stage as a profession. Everything is against her. The freedom of life, of speech, of gesture, which is the rule behind the curtain, renders it almost impossible for a woman to preserve that simplicity of manner which is, after all, her greatest charm. The whole life is artificial and unnatural to the last degree, and therefore an unhealthy life to live. But there are far more evils to be encountered than these. These drawbacks are the things that render it impossible for a lady to remain a lady. But what is unfortunately more to be deplored, is that a woman who endeavours to keep her purity is, almost of necessity, foredoomed to failure in her career. More I need not say; I could give chapter and verse for my authority by the dozen, but it would avail no good purpose, and, indeed, it would not be very savoury reading. All I can say is that I marvel at any mother who allows her daughter to take up a theatrical career, and still more am I astonished that a husband should calmly endure that his wife should become an actress unaccompanied by himself. Nor do I see how a woman is to escape contamination in one form or another.'

The Rev. Sharman gave a quick pant for breath and surveyed her apologetically over his spectacles. 'That,

Diana,' he said, 'was written by Clement Scott, who was one of England's leading dramatic critics for thirty-seven years.'

'Which thirty-seven?' asked Diana, with great politeness. The Rev. Sharman referred hastily to an index and looked plaintive.

'It doesn't say, I'm afraid,' he admitted at last, 'though he was born in 1841 and died in 1904. Would that help?'

'Did you,' Diana pursued, brushing this aside in a kindly way, 'know my mother at all well?'

'I was her brother,' the Rev. Sharman reminded her with a touch of reproof in his voice.

'Did any of the things Clement Scott wrote about happen to her?'

'Not that I know of,' said the Rev. Sharman, after a pause.

'Do you think they'll happen to me?'

'No,' admitted the Rev. Sharman, after another pause.

'And do you believe them yourself?'

'No,' said the Rev. Sharman, with hardly any pause at all.

'Are there any other reasons why it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go on the stage?'

'Not that I know of,' said the Rev. Sharman, growing more and more apologetic.

'Then may I?'

'Your aunt——' said the Rev. Sharman weakly, looking to her for moral support. 'I hardly—I wouldn't——'

'You're really quite decided about it, Diana?' Mrs. Bannock inquired, more to help her husband than for information.

'Oh, Aunt, you *know* I am!'

'I think,' said Mrs. Bannock, 'we might let you try it just for a few months, then, to see how you get on.'

Diana sat quite still, though her eyes were suddenly brighter.

'Thank you, darlings,' she said.

CHAPTER III

Robin Gardner

At the end of his last term the School did *Hamlet*, with Robin Gardner, in a wig of yellow wool and an incredible false bosom, as Ophelia.

As a result of the success that was his, Mrs. Gardner had a long talk with Mr. Gardner about his future, and whether they could see their way to let him take up the stage without loss of caste; Mr. Gardner being a Chief Accountant and standing for all that was quietly esteemed in Balham. At the end of the talk Mr. Gardner referred to figures and bank-books, did a sum on the back of a bill, and then announced with some weight that Robin could go to the Fay Compton Studio of Dramatic Art for two years, provided he lived on two pounds ten shillings a week and satisfied his parents that he was making proper use of his opportunity.

Mrs. Gardner told her husband that he was a fine, open-hearted father that any boy might be proud of and grateful to, kissed him, and went to look for Robin, while Mr. Gardner composed a letter to Fay Compton and rewrote it five times before he acquired the impressiveness Miss Compton would be sure to expect of a Chief Accountant deciding his son's future.

The formalities were duly and gravely dealt with in a most satisfactory manner, and Robin went up to London and was interviewed and pronounced promising. He did not, at the test, mention his minor triumph as Ophelia, but read a passage from *Lear*, because some one had told him it was unplayable and he hoped to make a good impression as an ambitionist.

The idea that he should live in London cast no slur on the transport between Balham and the West End. It was arranged more to give him a sense of self-reliance and independence so that he should not catch a cold travelling backwards and forwards in winter.

A pleasant young actor called Charles Hickman, who lectured at the school, gave him a lot of sound advice, and suggested looking for a room in Ebury Street. He remembered seeing Charles Hickman in a film, and was deeply impressed and flattered at the attention and at once got him to autograph his album. This—equally flattered and impressed—Mr. Hickman did. Robin went back to Balham, showed his father the autograph, and spoke eloquently of the reception he had been given.

The day he moved into the room in Libury Street, which was twenty-five shillings a week without gas but with breakfast and electric light, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner came up to London to see him settled in. After he had unpacked and shown them how far he had to go downstairs for the telephone, and the view of the Batterssea power-station from the window, they caught a bus to Piccadilly, lunched at Lyons' Corner House (on the third floor, because people seldom go up three floors when they only need go two or one, which means one can get a table near the window), and then went on to the New Theatre in St. Martin's Lane and stood in the pit queue until two o'clock, when the doors opened. From half-past two until five, with two ten-minute intervals, they watched John Gielgud in *Richard of Bordeaux*. Robin, sitting silent and motionless, drank in every word, every movement and gesture. Mrs. Gardner saw and heard, not Mr. Gielgud as Richard of Bordeaux, but her son (which is permissible only in a mother), and Mr. Gardner, endowed with less imagination, enjoyed himself no more or less than he felt a Chief Accountant ought to enjoy himself at the theatre, and had forgotten what he had seen before they got into the bus at Piccadilly Circus to go home. He always did.

When Robin had seen them off he felt suddenly aimless and insignificant. He stood in front of the London Pavilion and watched the buses swerving down the Haymarket into the Strand for a while, then transferred his attention to a Johnny Walker sign that walked, and then wandered with slightly uncertain step into Leicester

Square, went once round, and then sat on a bench in the garden in the middle.

Just over the road was a book-shop with French magazines full of nude ladies, displayed in Continental fashion for all to see. A small and seedy crowd was looking its fill and having its illusions destroyed with obvious pleasure, but being British it lacked the moral courage to buy a magazine or even thumb one, which is so bad for business.

Up behind him, the Empire flashed Garbo's name across the Square in huge orange letters that bit through the dusk and almost shouted at him to come inside and worship. A little to the right a Crystal Palace display of small unending motor cars moving across; a sign advertised electric light bulbs to whom it might concern.

He felt lonely, and unaccountably dispirited and hungry. Something in the way the little motor cars on the electric sign just went on and on, like targets in a shooting-gallery, gave him a sense of futility and uselessness. In the theatre he had felt a wild pang of physical excitement every time the curtain rose, a conviction that he was on the wrong side of the footlights, that he belonged behind with the smell of canvas and stale size and grease-paint and dust and cigarette smoke and face powder, strutting his little lines and taking his curtain behind Mr. Gielgud. In the theatre his future had seemed glamorous and rose-coloured. Out in Leicester Square it seemed vague and hopeless. It wasn't time for supper. It wasn't more than six o'clock. He felt very firmly that he didn't want to go back to the room in Ebury Street yet.

Perhaps he had better just go on sitting, and see if things looked brighter after one had thought them out a bit more.

A girl came past him dressed in black with a small fur round her neck and tight velvet hat. She had a very bright mouth and waggled her hips at him. He blushed fiercely and looked away, though intrigued. She walked up and down in front of him like a mannequin for a

minute or two, and then saw a Greek sailor and sped away in hot pursuit.

. The Square was much fuller suddenly.

There was a surging crowd outside the Empire, and the taxis began flowing as regularly as the little cars on the advertisement. A queue was forming outside the Alhambra gallery.

. An old charwoman, drunk, sat down on one side of him and breathed alcohol like a gas-jet. She was followed by a young man with no back to his head and a scrawny blonde, who sat down on the other side of Robin and set about each other without wasting time. Some one in a bowler asked him to buy a post-card of the Dooker York.

The young man kissed the scrawny blonde with a long, sucking noise. The charlady said her mother loved her, but that she didn't love her mother on account of something shady that once happened with a lodger, which was why she took to the drink. Did the pretty young gent have a sixpence he wouldn't miss?

The pretty young gent said how sorry he was, but no.

The young man plunged his hand down the scrawny blonde's neck and squeezed doggedly. She squealed appreciatively. Robin wondered if he oughtn't to move on; but there was nowhere to move to that wouldn't cost him something for a ticket or a cup of tea.

An Entertainer arrived to cheer the queue outside the Alhambra. They received him coldly, so he recited *Boots*.

All Robin could hear was an occasional '*Boots, boots, boots!*' above the noise of the traffic, but the queue could obviously hear a lot more, and Robin felt sorry for them. The scrawny blonde gave a sudden shocked giggle and smacked the young man's other hand, but the young man was no more daunted than the Entertainer, who had proceeded to *Dan McGrew*, complete with howl of timber-wolf and gestures.

. The queue was shuffling restlessly, but stood it.

The charlady subsided gently to one side, smiling softly but still smouldering.

There was a tearing noise from the V-neck and a genuine wail of anger, but it was appeased at once by another gold-fish kiss and more Swedish drill.

The howl of a timber-wolf lilted over from the queue.

Twenty past six.

It was almost pitch-dark, and the noise was deafening. Robin thought sentimentally of Ealing Broadway and his room at the back of the top floor, looking over the back garden and the park, with the film-actresses gummed round the wall and Marion Davies's signed photograph in the Woolworth frame over the bed.

Then suddenly, without warning, an Accordion Player arrived out of the gloom, set himself up midway between the Leicester Galleries and the Alhambra, and began *Good-night, Vienna*.

Dan McGrew stopped short in mid-syllable, and hope returned to the queue. The Entertainer turned slowly and watched the Accordion Player with glazed amazement. The Accordion Player played on.

Prabarr-whoow-whoee hab, Vienna!

The queue strained their necks, not averse to the new turn of things. Most queues like accordions. A foot or two began tapping. The Entertainer turned back to his audience and cleared his throat.

'I've 'card,' he announced measuredly—and one sensed he was cut to the quick—'of the British bein' a nation for feer play. Sportsmen. I myself for one 'ave always plyed the gime with my perfessional colleagues. Theer is a nunwritten *lor*, ladies and gent'men, that a British subjek respeks!' He flung his hand out towards the Accordion Player. 'I ask yer! Is that feer play? I gotta wif to feed, as well as 'er mother and a ailing baby. I don't pretend to be a genius at my work—I don't pretend to be spektakler—but I do expek feer play, ladies and gent'men! I expek ower friend with the akordean to wait 'is turn!' He raised his voice so that the Accordion Player and Robin could hear. 'I expek him to wait 'is turn instead of taking the bread out of women and children's moufs; that's wot I do!'

Twiddle-widdle-wonk-a-wee, Vienna! Prum!

Robin watched closely. He expected the British queue of sportsmen to put things right by chiding the Accordion Player for not waiting his turn.

The British queue did nothing of the sort. With curious lack of sportsmanship they glued their ears to the accordion, and rather shamefacedly avoided the Entertainer's eyes. The Entertainer, with one expressive glare of contempt up and down his public, took off his cap and walked down the queue with it.

Not a ha'penny left the queue. He put his cap on very deliberately when he reached the end, and faced his public. 'Blarsted capitalists!' he said with trembling scorn. 'Blarsted cap'tlists—all of yer! Damn the bloody lot of yer!' and set off for Wyndham's Theatre. As he passed the Accordion Player he spat on the kerb and twirled on it with his heel. Robin felt sorry for him in a way, but the Accordion Player moved up towards the queue without so much as a backward glance, and the queue welcomed him cordially. A fat lot they cared about fair play. They liked accordions. He took two and eightpence.

The young man with no back to his head was eating the scrawny blonde's neck, and she was loving it.

Robin rose up and walked back to Coventry Street and the Corner House with a heavy tread and a great sadness in his heart. Outside the Rialto a young man stopped him and asked for a match. While Robin was fumbling for one the young man asked him in a quiet conversational tone if he wanted any one to go home with him, and if so, it would be three pounds.

Robin dropped the matches into his hand and fled up the steps of the Rialto with singing ears. For the first time that evening he was horrified and shocked, and somehow mortally ashamed at being addressed by one of those. The Commissionaire suggested a half-crown seat. Robin hid behind him and pretended to study the time-table, and mumbled something about waiting until the big picture came on. The Commissionaire at once said that the big picture would be on in two minutes. Robin said it wasn't that picture he wanted to see, but

the other one, and anyway, he'd come back later, as he had to see some one first. The Commissionaire lost interest and turned on a fat woman who was trying to get by with a Great Dane.

Robin peered out nervously to see if the young man was still lurking in wait for him, and the fat woman all but set the Great Dane on the Commissionaire. The young man had gone, however, and Robin ventured on towards the Corner House without even knowing whether the Great Dane saw the big picture, bit the Commissionaire, or got taken home by the fat woman.

The ground-floor of the Corner House was crammed and swarming and swelteringly hot from the central heating. He gave up the idea of fighting for a ride in the lift, and climbed the three flights of stairs to the top floor.

The top floor was just as crammed and swarming and sweltering as the ground-floor, but had more cigarette smoke.

He walked round vaguely looking for a table. There wasn't a table free anywhere. He walked round again looking for an empty chair. The empty chairs were all at tables with people who stopped eating and glared fiercely at him when he laid his fingers on the chair-backs. With ebbing hope he explored the last few tables to the door. The very last had an empty chair and only one other person at it. Robin shut his eyes, pulled the chair back, and sat down with the determination of a spaniel lying on its back and refusing to be picked up.

'Why, good evening,' said a pleasant voice almost at once, in a friendly tone.

He looked up. There was a girl opposite him. She was a slight, attractive blonde with nice eyes. He felt he had seen her before, but didn't know her name. He smiled quickly and said, 'Why, *bullo* !'

'You don't remember me,' she said kindly. 'I met you this morning. I was being tried-out, too. I'm Diana Shand. You're Robin Gardner, aren't you.'

'Yes, and of course I remember you, and what luck

meeting you here like this! My hat, I'm glad!' said Robin enthusiastically. 'Are you going to do the course too?'

'I've only just come to London. I live in Sussex. I don't know many people yet, except a cousin on a newspaper, but he isn't very enthusiastic about my coming to London, and I haven't seen him. I was going to do a theatre—in the gallery—and then down to the Adelphi. A girl I met at the Studio this morning's in the chorus of *Helen*, and she's going to take me to a party that Ivor Novello's going to be at, probably.'

She had obviously been longing for some one to tell this to all day, so Robin did his best to be appreciative and not envious.

'That's marvellous,' said Robin. 'I'm just going to have something to eat and then go home.'

'Where do you live?'

'Ebury Street. Do you know it?'

'Of course I do. I'm in Eccleston Street. It runs across it.'

'Yes, please?' from a waitress, unexpectedly.

'A Lyonch,' said Diana, 'and an orange drink. The fourpenny one. What are you going to have?'

'The same,' said Robin, so that it sounded a compliment.

The waitress took their ash-tray away from them and vanished.

'I like the Corner House. Don't you?' asked Diana sociably.

Robin said how very much he liked the Corner House.

'And you don't think I'm awfully forward talking away to you like this, as if I'd known you quite a long time?'

'You don't know how grateful I feel,' he assured her warmly. 'I was feeling miserable when I came in here.'

'Does London make you feel that too? It does me. It's never seeing a face you know or something that's familiar like you're used to at home. We'll soon get used to it, though. And it's terribly exciting actually

starting to be actors. . . . I mean, we will by this time to-morrow. It *is* exciting, isn't it ?'

'That part is,' Robin agreed, 'and the people are grand ; but it does make you feel queer when you see a play and think : if it was two years' time I might be up there saying that. I went to *Richard of Bordeaux* this afternoon.'

'Did you ? What was it like ? Tell me about it ! I love John Gielgud. I'm longing to go. Was it really marvellous ?'

'Well, it was pretty good,' Robin admitted. 'I'd like to go again. Perhaps we could go together some time ?'

They went together that night, and through waiting at the stage door to see Mr. Gielgud go home Diana got to the Adelphi just after her friend in the chorus had left, and missed her party, so Robin took her to the Corner House for a cup of coffee instead, and then saw her home to the house in Eccleston Street.

§

It is more or less inevitable that two lonely young people taking the same course and attending the same lectures at a Studio of Dramatic Art should find enough in common to strike up a *rapprochement*. Diana was nineteen and Robin was twenty. The more it dawned on them that London had precious little time for lonely young people, the more were they drawn together. Life became something fraught with exciting and terrifying possibilities ; achievement and fame simply a question of time. They had ideals, comically and pathetically mighty ; but the Studio protected them from the machinery of the theatre proper, so they kept their ideals very nearly intact. The two years in front of them glowed invitingly.

A week after they had met in the Corner House they knew each other as well as they knew any one. Wherever they went they went together and paid for

themselves. When Robin's two pounds ten ran out, they stopped going out till the next week's allowance arrived, and read *Famous Plays of the Year* to each other in the bed-sitting-room in Ebury Street. Not in the bed-sitting-room in Eccleston Street, as Diana had a tough landlady who frightened her. They were only four minutes away from each other, anyway, except when it was foggy.

They had sandwiches at one o'clock, and tea; and supper at seven at a minute restaurant, three courses for one and six. It was really two courses and coffee, but they were not there to split straws.

They pooled sixpences for the *Theatre World* every month, and dreamed optimistically of the time that must surely come when they would be reproduced in two colours on the cover and displayed in various emotions on the middle pages.

In all, they made an adventure of the squalid business of living cheaply in London, which is a major achievement.

§

At the end of five months Diana suddenly realized they were in love with each other. It took Robin a little longer, and came about on the evening they went to see *Christopher Bean* in the gallery. When they came out it was raining a little, and Robin didn't have his coat. Then Diana remembered that he'd left it at the bed-sitting-room in Eccleston Street when he called for her; so of course he came upstairs when they got there to save her bringing it down to the front door for him, and it was quite natural for Diana to come down to the front door with him when he went, because he always got muddled with the lights, which switched themselves off after eight seconds, and somehow it was even more natural for Robin to stop half-way down, turn round, and quite suddenly and unexpectedly kiss Diana. There was a slight pause while they gazed at each other in amazement, their eyes wide, and Robin

nearly began to apologize ; but instead he took her hands in his and said with great humbleness, ' Oh, Diana, I love you.'

Diana said nothing, but she looked at him, and felt a foolish, warm happiness inside, and Robin felt vaguely that a terrific weight had been taken off his mind, without knowing what the weight was, and then held her in his arms very tightly and pressed his cheek against hers—which was like warm satin and smoother than he thought any one's cheek had a right to be—and wondered if he was ever going to know this funny complete happiness again.

Then the Voice of Hell in a crêpe kimono came shattering down the staircase.

' That'll be enough of that sort of thing in my 'ouse, Misshand ! ' it said ; and added, ' *if you please !* '

An ignoble confusion sent Robin fleeing into Eccleston Street with a muffled ' Good-night ' hurled over his shoulder, leaving Diana to cope with the Voice of Hell, which was now well into a righteous account of how it had had its eye on them two for a long time now, and if that was the sort of carryings-on Misshand was partial to, it dared say there was places where people'd turn a blind eye to it—more shame to them, said it—but this wasn't one of that kind of place, and if she had come here under a delusion that it was, she had either better go or be'ave herself like a respectable girl, which is what it had taken her for on first sight—*my*, how wrong it had been !

With enormous dignity Diana said how sorry she was, that the Voice of Hell was quite mistaken, and that anyway she was leaving in the morning. She then went into her room and shut the door.

The Voice of Hell, which still had a lot unsaid, carried on in the passage for a minute or two more, and then went back to wake up its spouse and fill his weary car with a second edition of the righteous account.

Diana went calmly to bed and fell asleep almost at once, not because she was in any way brazen enough to be left indifferent by the Voice of Hell, but because

other more important things made her feel at peace with all Creation.

Robin did not go back to the bed-sitting-room in Ebury Street. Instead, his footsteps led him down to the Chelsea Embankment, and with whirling thoughts and racing heart he walked unseeingly beside the Thames until he found himself with a start at the Fulham Bridge. There he sat on an iron bench and watched the muddy outlines of the tugs and barges go slushing past in the mist.

For a while he was too light-headed and overcome with excitement to realize that Diana had never actually said that she loved him too.

When it did occur to him, he was at once seized with a terrible misgiving—suppose she didn't! Suppose it had only been sympathy and kindness that made her allow him to take her in his arms—perhaps she had *wanted* to tell him that she could never be anything but a sister to him, and hadn't the heart to hurt his feelings! Perhaps he'd ruined everything—all that friendship and the wonderful contentment of being together—suppose he had ruined all that, and there was nothing to take its place!

'Ah, hell!' said Robin miserably. 'What have I done?'

And he wouldn't be able to see her until to-morrow—there were hours and hours in between. He wouldn't be able to sleep—he wouldn't be able to eat or think or breathe until he'd seen her again and found out definitely what sort of mad damage he'd done. . . . And rushing away like that when the awful old woman had shouted at them.

What a worm he must have looked, running away from an old slut in a kimono.

He ought to have rounded on her and put her in her place—something crushing yet witty. But he'd run away instead—looking as guilty as the woman was making him out to be.

Diana couldn't think much of a man that cleared off and left her when he ought to be protecting her. Any-

way, what right had he to expect her to think anything of him, if it came to that? He wasn't good-looking or charming or accomplished or even in a position to ask her to marry him; and she was beautiful—Fay Compton had said so—and charming and sensible—Charles Hickman had said so—and obviously she was going to be a terrific actress, and he'd only be a mill-stone round the neck of her career—but he loved her so much that there wasn't room to be unselfish, and if she didn't love him too, there wasn't anything else in the world that could even begin to make up for the uselessness of being alive—not even if he became a successful actor like Owen Nares.

An awful picture of the utter meaninglessness of life without Diana shimmered greenly in his mind. A leap from the Fulham Bridge before life without Diana; every time. Probably at that very moment she was lying awake despising him for running away from the kimono, and wishing she had never met him.

He gave a sudden soul-shaking sneeze that nearly threw his head between his legs.

He had forgotten to put his coat on.

§

He awoke the next morning with the solid conviction that a swarm of hornets were nesting in his head. When he turned his neck to see what time it was, he was racked with pain and it was twenty to twelve. His breakfast lay frozen by the bed. He tried to get up, and the hornets objected at once. He lay back and stared at the ceiling woefully. He had 'flu.

Later he rallied his strength enough to creep to the bathroom and brush his teeth. His mouth still felt like a restaurant carpet, so he crept back to bed and lay praying for death. All in good time Mrs. Wallace, who did the rooms and stole cigarettes and stamps, arrived with a large zinc bucket and an old mop, and expressed sympathetic amazement.

Robin peeped sadly over the top of the quilt and asked her very kindly to call some one at once.

'Call who?' asked Mrs. Wallace.

Any one.

Mrs. Wallace pointed out that with an instruction like that she could call the man who'd come about the gas leak in Number Seven, or even the two men who'd come to remove Mr. Widgery's furniture from Number Eleven. Would an aspirin do instead? She had one in her pocket. Been there quite a time, but it'd probably still work. Was it the influenza?

Robin said yes, it most probably was, and would she call Miss Abernethy?

'Ah,' said Mrs. Wallace, 'that's more *like*. "Any one" could mean any one. 'Course I'll call 'er. You jus' lie quiet and try not ter think,' and away she went to call Miss Abernethy.

Miss Abernethy had a curious habit of plopping her finger in and out of a thimble—an incessant habit. Until one knew about the thimble one usually mistook it for another sort of incessant habit altogether. The few words Robin had had with her were always impersonal and to the point, generally on the subject of high-water marks in the bath which she was certain were Number Eleven's; and if he ever went into the bathroom after Number Eleven and saw the marks, would he be sure to call her at once so that Number Eleven could be caught red-handed and made to clean it up himself?

He had never had dealings with the human side of Miss Abernethy, and gave her little credit for having one, so that when she came clambering up the stairs, rustling like an old newspaper and thimble all a-plop, he had an ominous fear that on learning his condition she would call the two men up from moving the furniture in Number Eleven and order them to throw him and his luggage out into the street then and there.

He had wronged the human side of Miss Abernethy.

She swept into the room with a deep rumble of pity, and had slapped a damp hand on his forehead and sent

Mrs. Wallace for Number Nine's thermometer before he had time to croak a 'Good-morning.'

'My, oh my, oh my!' said Miss Abernethy, working the thimble furiously with her free hand. 'You puir boy! It's the anflanzen, and me with not a spare bed-pan in the hoose. Is it in yer heid or yer chest?'

Robin said he thought it might be in the head.

Miss Abernethy at once caught his head and gave it two swift jerks. The room swam madly before his tortured eyes.

'You'll find that'll clear you,' she said optimistically. 'Let's see your tongue.'

Robin showed her a little of the restaurant carpet, and she flipped the thimble vigorously.

'My, oh my, oh my! It hes a vest orn,' said Miss Abernethy, hoping to cheer by jest. 'You puir boy! Shall I phone for your mither?'

'Not unless I'm going to die,' said Robin.

This she would not have. 'Meester Gardner,' she announced impressively, 'I wus through the War as a WAAC. You'll nevaire die—and my gudeness, but you nevaire et your breakfast!'

Robin explained how little he had wanted his breakfast.

'I'll make you some soup wi' Bovril and toast. The mair you eat the quicker the bowels wuk, and bowels are at the bott'm o' all anflanzen. Have you a shilling for the garse?'

'On the chest of drawers, by the stud-box,' Robin directed. Miss Abernethy found the shilling under a book of stamps, along with two pennies and a button—it was very near the end of the week—and popped it into the meter.

'We'll sune have the room bright and cheerful,' she promised, and nearly blew her face off as the gas caught. 'Theer. Now I'll get you cosy.'

This was a process known only to Miss Abernethy, and involved much frenzied thumping of mattresses and hammering of pillows.

When she stood back at last and surveyed her work

through a fine mist of drifting feathers, Robin lay in a state of such acute discomfort that to breathe meant a fresh turn of the screw.

Mrs. Wallace then arrived with the thermometer and two old magazines thrown out by Number Eight, and lingered to watch.

Miss Abernethy drew the thermometer from its case with gingerly care, and then thrashed it around in the air with such wild abandon that Robin expected every minute to see the mercury go shooting out of the end of it and away across the room.

When it became apparent that nothing would break the thermometer short of dropping it from a height, Miss Abernethy (followed by the fascinated Mrs. Wallace) darted to the window, screwed up her eyes until she could see nothing at all, and held it a few inches off the bridge of her nose for a moment. Whatever sensation it gave her was pleasant, and she returned to Robin, leant over him, and thrust it energetically into his mouth.

Mrs. Wallace gave a great sigh of relief and relaxed.

The thermometer tasted of peppermint-drops.

Three minutes went by in rapt silence.

Then Miss Abernethy snatched it out desperately, as if he had been trying to chew the end, and fled back to the window, Mrs. Wallace close in her wake and by now weak with suspense.

'My, oh my, oh my!' said Miss Abernethy after a pregnant pause. 'A hundred and one!'

Mrs. Wallace at once presented the magazines to Robin. There was something in the way she did it that made him feel he had only a little time left to read them.

They were *The Vogue Pattern Book* and *Commerce*.

Robin closed his eyes. After all, he just wanted to be allowed to die. Why couldn't they leave him in quiet to do it by himself?

Things were blank for a while after that, though the hornets were still somewhere about. Then he slowly discovered that he was being fed from a basin with a colossal spoon, and soup was finding its way down to a protesting haven.

Miss Abernethy's humanity was in full swing. Outside a yellow fog had crawled down on to Ebury Street. He lay and watched it pressing against the window, and Miss Abernethy went on ladling soup. Thank goodness the gas-fire was still burning—it was the one bit of optimism in the room, and Miss Abernethy was talking fifty to the dozen something she thought might be of interest, and the spoon was travelling up—and then back to the basin—and then up—and then back to the basin, and every time it hit the basin it went *glunk*!

'Niver have I seen,' penetrated from Miss Abernethy, 'niver have I seen a looser creature, and glad indeed I am to see him go. The people that used to be there, tu and fro, at all owers o' the day and night, was something wicked, so Number Ten told me, and the noises—my, oh my, oh my!—Number Ten called me himself one night and I heard for myself. Such grunting and slap and tickle as 'd shame a house of ill repute, not counting the high-water mark in the bath. Oot you go, my fine friend, I says to myself; and oot he's going! Theer. That's finished the soup. Would you like a wee bit more?'

He managed to convince her that he wouldn't.

'Then I'll leave you to sleep it off, and I'll bring you a cup of tea at fower, and you're no to feel tu bad about it.'

She patted his hand and pulled the pillow down into a lump. 'That better? Plop! Plop!'

He opened one eye and saw the thimble was back at work. Miss Abernethy tiptoed from the room. It made double the noise of her normal walk. Robin closed his eyes and fell into a sad sleep.

§

The coal-man woke him up.

The coal-man had a habit of keening his wares in a long-drawn howl that rose to a very frenzy of supplication and then petered away to a moan, and it penetrated shut windows and sealed doors with the ease of a scientific ray.

'Caow-o-o-ooo-o-ool! Waow-o-o-ooool! Ooo-ooow-ool! Waow!' It shot up to the bed-sitting-room and amplified itself obligingly. Robin pushed his head under the pillow and gritted his teeth. Please, God, strike down that coal-man.

'Caw-o-o-ooo-o-ool!'

Then if He wasn't going to strike down the coal-man, would He strike him down instead? It was almost immaterial which one of them went.

'Waow-o-o-ool!'

There was a knock on the door.

Miss Abernethy and tea.

He uncovered his head and whispered a half-hearted, 'Come in.'

The door opened and there was Diana.

Diana.

Diana, Diana, Diana.

That's what had been wrong all day! He'd forgotten he was still in the same world as Diana! And now Diana had come everything was going to be all right. . . . *Caow-o-o-ool!* Good old coal-man! . . . Diana had come!

'Oh, Robin!' she cried in deep concern. 'Oh, Robin, my poor, dearest darling!' and she had run across the room, and was kneeling beside him and had kissed him and was putting her arms about him, and Robin was almost weeping at being appreciated again, and she was pressing her cheek against his, as he had done the night before, and saying silly little things to him in a way that wasn't silly, and he was trying to make himself realize that she loved him—even when he was in bed and looking awful with 'flu; which was so amazing—and probably she loved him nearly as much as he loved her.

'My,' said Miss Abernethy from the door, 'oh my, oh my! You'll catch his anflanza, sure as fate.'

She came into the room and put a cup of tea and a Marie biscuit down on the chair by his bed.

'This is Miss Shand, Miss Abernethy,' said Robin, hoping it explained everything. 'This is Miss Abernethy, Miss Shand.'

'I'll get another cup of tea,' said Miss Abernethy.

'Do you mind about me being here?' Diana asked apologetically, for to her all landladies were Voices of Hell in or out of kimonos. 'I should have asked first at the front door.'

Miss Abernethy plopped the thimble to show how well she understood it all, and said it was perfectly all right—if it had been Number Eleven, now, that would have been another matter; but Mr. Gardner being who he was, she was most pleased he had such a nice young lady to see him, and she'd get that cup of tea.

When she had gone again they both felt a little awkward. Robin didn't ask her to come back beside him because Miss Abernethy had been right about her catching the 'flu, and he ought to have thought of it himself, and Diana was afraid she had been too forward about running to him like that and kissing him; but when they caught each other's eyes and saw how happy they were, he held out his hand, and she sat on the side of the bed and took it gently in her own.

'We're going to be happy,' said Robin. 'We're going to be happy. Oh, Diana, I love you so,' and he pressed her hand contentedly. 'I love you so.'

And then Diana, speaking rather quickly, told him how worried she had been when he hadn't been at the bus stop that morning and not at the Studio later, and how she began wondering where he was and what he was doing and why he hadn't come, and was afraid he hadn't meant to kiss her the night before, and was staying away because he didn't know how to explain that it was a mistake; and then, when Mr. Hickman had asked where he was, and then suggested that perhaps he'd caught a cold or something, she remembered how he had gone all the way back from *Christopher Bean* without his coat in the rain, and knew that that was exactly what had happened, and came straight back, and found the front door open and hadn't waited to be announced; and how glad she was that it was a cold and not that he didn't want to see her. And Robin thought how absolutely extraordinary it was to think even for a second that he could possibly not want to see her, and

how humbly grateful he was for every second that he was able to spend seeing her, and was made to drink the tea before it went cold, but was let off the Marie biscuit—and then Miss Abernethy came back with the other cup of tea and stayed to talk, and in the natural flow of conversation learnt that Diana was leaving the room in Eccleston Street as soon as she could find somewhere to go, and at once rushed her off to see Number Eleven, which was now empty, and had been thirty-five shillings a week with breakfast, but could be had for thirty (furnished), and as this was what Diana had been paying at Eccleston Street there was a lot of quick agreeing and settling and Diana had taken the room, which had two windows into Ebury Street, and one into the yard and was right next to the bathroom, where Number Eleven used to leave his high-water marks.

Would it be possible to come in on Monday?

Let Miss Abernethy see—there were the extra divan and the wardrobe from Number Four and a table and a chair in the cellar, and a lamp-stand in Number Thirteen, and the curtains were there already. . . . Yes, it would be quite in order for Miss Shand to come in on Monday—Sunday afternoon, if she liked.

She would like Sunday afternoon.

Then it was all arranged, and she dared say Mr. Gardner would be out of his 'flu in no time at all when he heard.

During this intricate arrangement Robin lay in bed upstairs and gazed sentimentally at the faded chintz curtains over the window, which were yellow birds and purple corn-sheaves relieved with dispirited pink grapes in bunches, and quietly decided that shelter in the benign arms of a Studio of Dramatic Art would have to end for him and job-hunting take its place. . . . He was now in a responsible position, and should be earning at that very moment instead of loafing about with 'flu.

He must get a job in a successful play—or at least a play that looked as if it was going to be successful—as an understudy or anything that would bring him enough money to make marriage a practical possibility and not a hazy one. He would have to go to some one for

advice: it would be a bit embarrassing to ask Miss Compton, although she would be sure to be sympathetic and understanding, because being twenty and only having four months' training wasn't much of a prospect to be contemplating matrimony on, and she'd be sure to point it out very nicely and be quite right, and she might think he was interfering with Diana's future as an actress, which again was quite right; but seeing how much they loved each other, it was far more important to go on loving each other than to become successful actors, though nobody was going to think so except themselves.

Then he remembered having heard that for every actor in a job, seventy were out of one. That was apt to crush every sort of hope one ever dared have, but one could balance it with the people who had shot up from obscurity in one part that had been pure luck, and then been signed up at two hundred pounds a week and sent to Hollywood. That could happen.

And nothing could happen, which was a lot more likely.

But wasn't it worth taking a chance, if it meant that Diana and he could be married earlier?

He *would* speak to Miss Compton.

. . . Or would it be awful cheek?

Perhaps he'd better try it out on Charles Hickman first, pretending it was just two people he knew, and find out what he thought about it. He had a kind face, and would probably be constructive. He felt sure he wouldn't laugh, anyway.

That's what he'd do, to-morrow—or as soon as he got up. Somehow he felt deep down inside him that everything would work out all right provided he hoped hard enough and concentrated on it, because it was all so right and natural to be in love with some one like Diana, and so wonderful that some one like Diana was in love with him. The love between them would be so much stronger than the things that life would throw up against them, that it just meant waiting patiently until everything had been worn down and they could be together.

It was seventy to one against his getting a job.

Somehow and somewhere he was going to get one.

and they could have a small two-roomed flat with its own kitchen and bathroom, and window-boxes.

Life wouldn't have started off being kind to them if it wasn't going to go on being kind to them.

Then Diana came back with the news that after Sunday she would be in the room downstairs, and his cup was full. He asked no more of life for the present.

Rather diffidently he invited Mr. Hickman to take a cup of coffee with him at the Café Royal. This cost money and the waiters terrified him, but the occasion warranted a fitting background.

They sat at a table near the Ladies' Orchestra that lent such soothing respectability to the otherwise highly French atmosphere, and chatted of this and that in an airy manner until the waiter had delivered the coffee and departed with a quiet sneer at the tip, and then Robin began explaining carefully how a friend of his (a boy) and another friend of his (a girl) were in love with each other, and how much they wanted to get married and how little they had to do it on, and did Mr. Hickman think his Friend (the first one, the man) would be wise if he gave up his Night Classes and launched out as a free-lance in the hope of getting a job?

Mr. Hickman saddened him by saying he didn't think his Friend would be wise at all, if he really wanted his opinion, though of course it was only what he thought and was quite probably wrong. Robin hastily assured him that he was quite probably right, but this Friend of his was so set on getting a job that it was most difficult to discourage him, if Mr. Hickman knew what he meant; and supposing this Friend *did* give up his Night Classes in the face of all counsel, what did Mr. Hickman think was the best thing for him to do then?

Mr. Hickman suggested that as they were casting for *The Wind and the Rain* tours Robin might go along and see if he couldn't get a job as an understudy on one of them.

It took a slight pause for Robin to realize that the

extravagant talk about the Friend had gone wrong somewhere, but he admitted that it *was* him, and that the girl was Miss Shand, and did Mr. Hickman really think he stood a chance of getting a part in *The Wind and the Rain*?

Mr. Hickman said he had no opinion one way or the other, it was simply a question of whether they liked him, and told him where to write for an interview, though his first opinion about its being unwise still held good.

As a direct result of this advice Robin received a reply to his request for an interview, asking him to call on Tuesday at 11 a.m.

On Tuesday at 1.45 p.m. he was ushered into an office, made to read a part, and told quite kindly that he wasn't experienced enough. What work had he done so far? Robin said he'd done three years in the Bristol Repertory Theatre, trusting in Providence that no one would write to Bristol and check up on him. What parts had he done? He spun out a list of characters from all the plays he could remember.

He was asked to do one.

He did the speech from *King Lear* again, which he now knew by heart. No one thought to point out that even in the Bristol Repertory Theatre it was highly doubtful that any one so young and light would have been cast for *Lear*. Instead, they took his name and address, and said they'd let him know if anything turned up that he might be used for.

He thanked them and went.

CHAPTER IV

Re-enter Second Villain, left

WHEN seventeen theatrical managers, six agents, two casting bureaux and five film companies (three of which made shocking films) had told Robin through the medium of secretaries or other menials, with varying degrees of civility, that there wasn't anything at the

moment, but that if he left his name and address they would let him know when there was, his stout heart began to falter and his rigid determination flickered and grew a little dim. Although there is something very beautiful in the way the theatrical profession couples every rejection with the promise of better things to come and makes a great flourish of taking down names and addresses in a depressingly big book, this affords poor balm to the spurned, who has had his name and address taken thirty times already and isn't fooled for a moment.

Robin had accepted the first baker's-dozen rejections as necessary forerunners of the better things to come; but thirty bumps following in swift succession over a period of two weeks—which works out, after all, at an average of two a day—can play havoc with an inferiority complex; and waiting in draughty outer-offices on uncomfortable benches beside very old and hungry actors and very *passée* and equally hungry actresses can plunge the most valiant spirit to a new low depth.

There is no way of convincing a cold stare that one is the new Donat and going for a song. There is no way of impressing upon a blank disinterest the cash value of one's personality. Nature has not equipped one with anything to do it with. There is only the name and address to be given after the promise has been intoned, and the office-boy's contemptuous eye to avoid as one goes out—ah, glory to God, the suffusing shame and miserable humiliation of it all! He felt like Caliban, only less important.

He was no use to any one as an actor.

He was no use to any one anyway.

He was a mill-stone.

He might as well jump under that bus instead of climbing up its stairs and asking the conductor for a twopenny ticket to Victoria and home.

The strain of being optimistic and cheerful in front of Diana was beginning to wear him away. The thought of telling her that to-day had seen the end of the campaign and that he wasn't going to get a job after all haunted him distressfully. No matter how sympathetic

she was going to be, he would know that deep underneath would be a disappointment in him, a feeling of trust misplaced.

Perhaps he had better not go back yet.

Perhaps a shilling seat in the New Victoria cinema; just to put off the bitter hour for a while. But she would be waiting to hear. And it was better to get it over, really.

He was tired and dispirited. Things were conspiring against their getting married, and the bus fares over the last two weeks had eaten a small Etna out of his allowance, and he had been missing class at the Studio after promising his father that he wouldn't. He was letting every one down all round, and had nothing to show for it.

The bus had slowed down, and the conductor was carolling hoarsely to all those concerned with Grosvenor Gardens. Robin scrambled to his feet, catapulted down the stairs, and reached the pavement as the bus began moving again. He crossed the road to Ebury Street with a heart that grew heavier at every step. If only there had been a 'Come back to-morrow—Mr. Rozetstein is out to lunch,' or even a word of cheer from a secretary—just one small thing of hope to tell Diana. But there wasn't.

Nobody thought he was any good. Nobody thought he was any good.

'Vilets?' said a voice. 'Lovely spring vilets. Sixpence. 'Aven't sold a bunch all day, mister. 'Ave a bunch for luck. *Lovely* spring vilets sixpence.'

He looked down. A small, badly-tied parcel of old clothes was holding a cardboard boot-box lid up to him with two bunches of little corpses laid out on it.

The Parcel was obviously very old and very weary, and no one in his right senses was going to buy the dead violets. He had one and twopence till Saturday, and it was Thursday. He proffered the shilling and asked for change. The Parcel gave a defeated sob and said she hadn't any, which meant she'd be starved stiff by to-morrow, not having eaten for two days—what about

the kind gentleman taking two bunches? They'd bring him luck, they would, honestest Gawd, and two bunches was a handsome gift for any woman. There was nothing else to be done. The Parcel got her shilling, and Robin continued on his way with a handsome gift for Diana and two pennies clinking plaintively against his leg as he walked.

Miss Abernethy was on her hands and knees in the hall when he let himself in, trimming the frayed end of the hall carpet with a pair of nail-scissors, and he nearly tripped over her. She greeted him cordially over her left shoulder, and brought to his attention a letter that had come by the four o'clock post on the green-baize board, but never moved her concentration from the carpet.

A sudden excitement filled him as he took it down and found it typewritten.

One of the thirty promises . . . or another chance. . . . He tore it open.

'Dear Sir,' it said. *'Have you given serious thought to the fact that illness is always just round the corner? Have you provided against the time when lack of work may mean poverty? Are you in complete health? Are you insured?'*

'I hope it's not bad news?' said Miss Abernethy with her mouth full of fluff.

'No,' said Robin. 'No. It's not Thank you.'

He put it in his pocket and went slowly up the stairs. Number Six's door was open as he passed, and a gramophone which was dead but wouldn't lie down was churning away at a record with a crack in it. 'Give yourself a pat on the back,' it cried hoarsely, 'a pat on the back—*click, chunk!*—a pat on the back! Say to yourself, here's jolly good—*click, chunk!*—health, I've had a good day to-day—*clank!*'

The light on the second floor wouldn't go on when he pressed the button. He did the next flight in darkness, and caught his elbow on the black marble negro holding a salver at the bend of the stairs so that he dropped the violets, and banged his head on the salver when he stood

up again, which made his eyes water, and it was all part of a black plot against him.

He paused when he reached Diana's door. He had meant to go up to his own room first, and take his coat off and brush his hair, but suddenly decided that he must see Diana at once, and get it all soothed away, or he would die. He knocked.

'Enter, enter,' said an unmusical voice, male.

Something was wrong.

Second floor—that was right. Number Eleven. That was right. Then it was either Robin or the voice that wasn't. He knocked again, with less enthusiasm, just to make sure.

'Well, come in!' said the voice impatiently.

Diana must have moved. Or gone home. But Miss Abernethy would have told him. He opened the door gingerly and peered round.

A wiry and not very beautiful young man in horn-rimmed glasses lay on the divan with his coat off and his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. He peered over the top of an *Evening Standard* back at Robin.

'Hullo,' he said. 'Looking for Diana?'

'Yes, please,' said Robin, stunned.

'She won't be long. She went upstairs to make tea in somebody else's room. Better sit down and wait, if she's expecting you. Is she expecting you?'

'In a way,' said Robin. 'At least, I don't know. I thought she was.'

'Then it's all right with me,' the young man assured him. 'Have a cigarette. What's your name?'

'Robin Gardner.'

A dawn of recognition lit the other's homely face.

'Oh, that's who you are, is it? How do. I'm Garstin Bannock. You'll have heard Diana talk of me. Cousin.'

'How do you do,' said Robin, with a rush of wild relief.

'She's in your room, then,' said Garstin intelligently.

'Yes. Perhaps I ought to help her with the tea.'

'I wouldn't. She doesn't expect it. I've just been hearing all about you.'

'Oh yes?' said Robin politely.

'Yes,' said Garstin, and eyed him up and down disconcertingly.

'It doesn't feel like spring; does it?' asked Robin, after a hush, sitting down.

'What doesn't?'

'The weather.'

'Why should it? It's still winter.'

'There is that,' Robin admitted, beginning to flounder.

'How long have you been in London?'

'Seven months.'

'Same time as Diana.'

'Yes.'

'I've been here two years.'

'Oh yes?' said Robin again, even more politely.

'Fleet Street. Filthy life. Why don't you take your coat off?'

'I was just going to,' Robin assured him, having forgotten all about it. He stood up hastily, and the violets fell to the floor again. Nothing escaped the Garstin eye. He gave the violets a quizzical stare, and then gave Robin another, even more quizzical.

'Not for me?' he inquired archly.

'What . . . the violets? As a matter of fact, I didn't really mean to buy them,' Robin explained, blushing fiercely. 'I was going to give them to Diana.'

'Lucky, lucky girl,' said Garstin, with spurious gravity.

Robin began to feel a real hatred of Garstin Bannock take root. Garstin, who had never met a soul in Fleet Street he could practise sarcasm on without coming off worst, warmed to his work.

'Do you often bring Diana flowers? Or have I barged in on a celebration?'

'No, of course not!'

'She's a good-looker, isn't she? I got the shock of my life when I saw her. Marvellous what a couple of years can do. She was all leg and fringe the last time I

set eyes on her. Now she's all melting womanhood and sex appeal. Marvellous.'

'I think I'll go up and see if there's anything I can do,' said Robin with mounting resentment.

'Ah, no. Stay and cheer me with chatter,' Garstin besought. 'I like you a lot.' Pause while Gardner registers polite incredulity. Pause over. 'Sit down again and have a cigarette. I asked you once before, but you were too busy thinking what an ugly little runt I was to answer.'

'I wasn't,' said Robin weakly.

'You were,' Garstin contradicted easily; 'but I don't mind. I know it. Still, horn-rimmed glasses and spots often conceal a spiritual Apollo. I, too, have had my conquests. Man, woman or dog I throw it on a bed.'

'I hope you don't mind,' said Robin with great firmness, 'but I'm going to carry the tea-things down. Excuse me,' and he left the room before Garstin had time to say him yea or nay. He ran up the stairs to his room, and burst in at the door with a clatter. Diana was on her knees in front of the gas-ring, but jumped up delightedly when she saw him and held out her arms with 'Oh, Robin darling, I'm so glad you're back!' said in tones of such enormous happiness that Garstin and the thirty refusals and the insurance letter and the black marble negro were all swept away to perdition in one flash, and he had his arms round her and was holding her tightly against him, and his heart was stout again and his rigid determination as good as new, and the kettle was boiling over and directing clouds of steam into the divan bed.

'Oo-oo,' said Garstin from the door. 'Kettle's boiling.'

He entered at his leisure, amid confusion, and turned off the gas.

'I thought it'd be a saving of much toil if we had tea up here,' he explained, and poured the hot water into the tea-pot while Diana and Robin stood humiliated and unhappy at being caught by Garstin Bannock;

'though I don't expect for a moment to be asked to the wedding. Have you given Diana the violets?'

Speechless and scarlet, Robin handed the two bunches to Diana, who took them with an inaudible, 'Thank you very much, Robin,' and looked at them helplessly.

'That's right,' said Garstin pleasantly. 'And I'd put them in water.' He looked up at his two silent companions and twitched an eyebrow. 'My, we're having whoopee,' he added. 'Hot-cha. Might Garstin the Pink Pest have a cup of tea?'

'I'm so sorry,' said Diana quickly, and began pouring out with great rapidity. 'Do you still take milk and sugar, Garstin?'

'Now as always,' nodded Garstin. 'I must say that, while expecting very little when I called, I didn't expect to be openly loathed.'

'Don't be silly,' Diana returned, in a firmer voice. 'It's just that I haven't seen you for a long time; and I wasn't expecting you or anything.'

'You can blame Mamma. She's been sending two letters a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, ever since you came to London, exhorting me to make myself known and to give help and advice on this and that. I spared you as long as I could without openly defying my parent. I must say, if I'd known what you'd blossomed into, I'd have come sooner. It was so hard to tell when you were still in the cocoon, though. Remember? Floppy straw hat and the green gym-dress that whiffed of tar? And cigarette cards glued in your school-books. You were pretty lousy.' He caught Robin's scowl out of the corner of his eye. 'Mind you, I was lousier. Repressed and experimental, if I remember rightly. All gone now, as I was telling Gardner downstairs. He wasn't interested, though.' He veered round and faced Robin frankly. 'Do I really make you feel you'd like to kick me downstairs? Don't answer. I can see I do. And yet I mean pathetically well, and I like you a lot, Gardner. You've got the thing.'

'What thing?' Diana demanded, prepared if necessary to do battle.

'In the eyes,' said Garstin, waving a hand in explanation. 'He'll get there.'

'You mean, he'll be a famous actor?' asked Diana with more cordiality.

'S what I said!' Garstin nodded. 'You can tell 'em straight off if you've got a bent for it, and I have. There's that thing in the face. Box-office personality. I'll tell you who else had it. Doug. Remember Douglas Middleton? He's in America at the moment with *God's Stepchildren*—enormous success—Broadway—run a year. He's playing the juvenile lead. Coming back when it's finished. Women outside the stage door every night, all but tearing the buttons off him for souvenirs. It's all a question of holding out—or hanging on, whichever way you like. First of all nobody would look at him. He went the rounds of every manager in London, and all the agents, and all the film companies. Wouldn't even look at him. One or two made dirty cracks about his having an irregular face, but he didn't care. He always said the old slop-buckets'd come crawling back one day, begging him with tears in their eyes to sign five-year contracts. The thing is, Gardner old poppet, you're up against a bunch of fluff from under a maid's bed when you're tackling managers. They've got a habit of letting the other guy take the risk, and then they take the star. Every one of 'em leaves it to every one else to discover the new stuff, so the new stuff has to discover itself, or fall down and go boom. And they can't spot the thing, like I can. No sense of theatre, any of 'em. They've got to see you in a rival theatre before they want you. But they'll want you yet, you mark my words. How long's your course?'

'Two years,' said Robin, fascinated in spite of himself.

'At the end of two years you ought to know your job well enough to tackle anything. If I had half a crown I'd put it on you for a win and place. Which is my tea?'

'Any one,' said Diana, coming back to earth with a

start. 'I haven't put sugar in the one at the end, though. Then do you think Robin should finish his course before he starts looking for work?'

'He's asking every one to kick him in the pants if he starts before. Believe me, I *know*. Have you two knocked around at all yet?'

'In what sort of way?' Robin asked.

'Seeing life. Meeting the Big Noises. How many Big Noises have you met?'

'Only Fay Compton, so far.'

'What do you do at nights?'

'Sometimes we go in a gallery, or to a film, if it's a good one; but mostly we just come home,' said Diana.

'Got a lot of friends?'

'Well, the other people at the Studio. They're most of them awfully nice.'

'Do you see 'em outside the School?'

'Well—no,' Diana admitted.

'And that's all the friends you've got?'

'I suppose so. Yes.'

'Have you ever been to the Café Royal? Late at night, I mean.'

'No,' said Robin self-consciously.

'Or the Running Horse, or the Bunch of Grapes, or the Savoy Grill, or the Ivy?'

'No,' said Diana.

Garstin drew a deep breath. 'Crumbs!' he said. 'What *have* you been doing, then? What's the *point* of living in London if you just come home every night?'

'We haven't very much money, either of us, Garstin.'

'Who has? If you know the *form*, you don't need any. Been to any parties?'

'No,' said Diana.

'Would you like to go to parties?'

Diana and Robin looked at each other for confirmation.

'Yes,' said Diana. 'I think so. Would we, Robin?'

'Yes,' said Robin. 'I think so.'

'I'm going to educate you, then,' Garstin announced

firmly. 'I'm going to show you London. I'm going to have you meet people. My hat!' he said warmly. 'How do you expect to act if you don't study types?'

They both saw the force of this argument very clearly, and changed their opinions of Garstin a lot.

'Now draw close and attend, my lovelies. You're going to learn about life. Not far from this abode, a mere polka down the Fulham Road, dwells a reporter well known to me, by the name of Flossie Carter, and this night, God wot, he throws a binge. You and Cock Robin are going.'

'Oh, but we can't!' Diana interrupted.

'Oh, but you can. Anybody I like to take I take, and Flossie's tickled purple. Naturally you won't know anybody there, but where in London could I take you where you would? And there's always enough drink. Flossie's old man owns half the paper I grace with my art, and the money flows like goat's milk at a Swiss picnic. Get your hat. We're going. Robin, my poppet, change that suit for something of less sentimental value. You never know what'll be spilt down it. Look, I'm going to phone Flossie and tell him we'll be along to supper. That'll give you time to get friendly before the rest of the party slopes in. He's a useful fellow to know, with all that cash back of him. You'll find him very pleasant, though queer as hell. Diana, your hat. Wait, though. I'd better phone first. Where is it?'

'I'll show you,' said Robin. 'It's on the ground-floor. It's a public call-box.'

So Robin took Garstin down to the phone, and had to lend him the two pennies, and stood outside while he phoned and wondered if it was quite wise to go out to a strange party with Garstin, and wasn't sure if he liked the idea much; and Diana went down to her room and put on her hat and her second-best coat, and wondered if it was quite wise to go out to a strange party with Garstin, and wasn't sure if she liked the idea much; and Garstin dialled the wrong number and gave the girl at the exchange such a shock with his language that

she readily believed it was all her fault, and put him through to Flossie Carter in seven seconds, which is pretty good for a girl at the exchange, and Flossie Carter having been acquainted of the facts said, 'But of *course*, my dear! What's he look like? Will I like him?' and when Garstin had rung off and been shown where he could wash his hands, and told how he would have to whistle quietly, as the bathroom door catch didn't work, Robin went back to find Diana and tell her about Garstin taking his last twopence and to borrow half a crown till Saturday; but they didn't dare linger to talk about anything else in case Garstin caught them again; and Robin went back upstairs to get his hat and coat and wait for Garstin, who was whistling loudly in A sharp in the bathroom.

When Garstin reappeared, he brushed his hair with Robin's brushes, and put his tie straight in Robin's mirror and flattened his eyebrows with spit to make them glossy, and then stood back and looked at himself appraisingly.

'Oh, boy,' he said at last, 'isn't that a picture? The wrong answer to the Maiden's Prayer. Come on, let's go places and do things behind curtains!'

They went down one floor and called Diana, and then down into the hall, where Diana and Garstin waited while Robin went out to find a taxi in the drizzle, which he did almost at once, and then bundled into it, and had all been settled into the seat fully a minute when the taxi-driver opened his little glass window and asked where they were thinking of going, if anywhere, and then Garstin couldn't remember the address, and Robin had to go back to look in the telephone book, and found Number Three in the call-box saying something very personal, so he asked for the book in dumb-show through the glass, which infuriated Number Three at first, but had the desired result when she realized he wasn't just making faces at her for the whim of it. There were four pages of Carters in the book, but never a one called Flossie, so (frenzied by now) Robin rushed back to the taxi with it, to find that Garstin had only a minute after

he'd gone remembered the address and they were waiting for him.

On the way no one spoke very much owing to noise, the taxi being a very old one, but smiled self-consciously at each other whenever they were lit up by the street-lamps, which happened spasmodically, and tried to think of something amusing to say to Garstin, who kept opening his mouth to say something amusing to them and then closing it again because the rattle meant shouting and he considered his wit would lose subtlety if roared above a din.

Away down King's Road they went, skipping under the noses of the Eleven Buses and shaving flower-barrows by a hair's breath, until Chelsea was left behind and Fulham lay on the port bow, and then the taxi-driver did a great deal of neat doubling down side streets and interweaving alleys, and eventually popped out on the Fulham Road and tried to charge an old lady in an Eton boater on a bicycle (who had stopped to pinch her back tyre in the middle of the traffic and was causing incredible chaos), and then swirled away up the first turning on the left, did three more turns which must have taken them round in a square, blew his horn twice, and drew up with a wild, anguished screech of brakes in front of a brick wall with a door in it.

In the sudden calm that descended, the sound of the meter-bell came like a peal from Big Ben.

'Here,' said Garstin, 'we are.' He opened the door and scrambled out, fumbling.

'Do I pay?' whispered Robin in Diana's ear.

'Wait,' whispered Diana, watching Garstin's fumble doubtfully. 'Not unless you have to.' Garstin here unearthed two half-crowns and ordered change, so they relaxed and climbed out on to the pavement. The taxi gave an asthmatic roar, began trembling violently again, and soon clattered away into the night. Watching it go, Diana and Robin felt their last link with escape severed. They were now at the mercy of Chance for a whole evening, and Garstin was ringing the bell.

After a short pause a window high above them was

flung open and a contralto voice said: 'Is that you, Woofie, you old cow?'

.('Wrong door,' thought Robin and Diana, both together.)

'Who else?' Garstin demanded briskly. 'Come down and let us in. We're freezing.'

'My dear, I'm in my *bath*!' the contralto voice expostulated. 'Wait, and I'll throw a key down. If I can *find* the silly little thing!'

. 'The head disappeared, and Garstin turned back to them.

'That's Flossie all over,' he said tolerantly.

'But wasn't he expecting us?' asked Diana nervously.

'Sure,' Garstin assured her.

'Then why did he think you were some one else?'

'He didn't. He always calls me Woofie. Forgot to tell you. And don't mind the way he behaves. He won't give you any trouble. He's secretly engaged to a boy in the chorus of *Gay Debauch*. Gosh, it is cold!'

The head reappeared above them.

'Coming,' it called out, 'and don't lose it, or I'll tear your eyes out! It's the *only* one I've got left.' There was a tinkle on the pavement near Robin's foot, and he picked up the key and handed it to Garstin.

'Got it?' the voice inquired anxiously.

'Yeah,' said Garstin. 'Back to your bath, Bathsheba!' He opened the door and went in first, but waited inside for Diana and Robin. 'Go on up,' he said encouragingly, shutting the door again. 'Straight up the stairs and first on your right.'

Diana went straight on up and first on her right, and found herself in the kitchen.

'I mean left,' Garstin corrected himself, opening the other door. 'Phoo, what a stink! Hey, Flossie, there's a mouse died in the sitting-room.'

'Don't be *rude*!' the voice gave answer, two doors away. 'It's my new incense, and *quite* divine! Help yourself to drinks. I won't be a *second*!'

Diana and Robin gazed round the room in wonder. It was furnished entirely in white except the floor, which

was mauve, and the pictures, which were frightful, and bespoke an opulence beyond their greatest dreams. The settee and easy-chairs were in a glossy white, and the tables were of white frosted glass, quite plain, with chromium legs that went down and along the floor and up the other side again, and the fire-place was white alabaster, with white ornaments on it, and the curtains were the same glossy white as the settee and the chairs. The carpet was sheepskin, which was exciting to tread on, and made one feel vaguely opulent oneself, and in one corner was an enormous white radio-gramophone which was being used at the moment by Henry Hall and the B.B.C. Dance Orchestra.

'Sit down,' Garstin invited. 'There's cigarettes in that glass box by the sofa. What'll you have to drink? Martini, gin-and-lime, sherry? Everything here. Flossie does himself proud with liquor.' He opened a white cocktail-cabinet, and a glitter of bottles and glasses danced before their eyes. 'Diana?'

'I don't think anything, just yet, Garstin,' she said in a small voice. 'I don't feel thirsty.'

'Have a gin-and-lime, then,' Garstin prescribed. 'That'll make you feel thirsty. Same for you, Cock Robin?'

'Yes, thank you,' said Robin, wrenching his gaze from the picture over the fire-place, which was two indigo figures intricately entangled and hypnotized him.

Garstin chose two bottles from the throng and began shaking them efficiently.

'What's the matter?' he inquired after a moment 'Don't you want to sit down? The furniture ain't here to be goggled at. It works.'

Diana, who had been hanging back for fear of making finger-marks on the sofa, sat down gingerly. It gave pleasantly, and she felt very comfortable, and if Garstin hadn't been there she would have bounced up and down on it to see if it had springs or was air cushions. Robin, though wanting very much to sit beside her for moral support, sat opposite in one of the chairs and kept his hands carefully on his knees.

'Not a bad flat, is it?' asked Garstin off-handedly, bringing them two glasses. 'Not my own taste, but it goes with his personality. Plunge these to the abdomen and report results.' He presented the gin-and-limes and went back for his own. 'Here's mud in your eye,' he said, and they all drank. He watched for the effect. 'Well?' he encouraged. 'Like it?'

• 'Yes, thank you,' said Diana.

• 'Yes, thank you,' said Robin.

• 'More?'

• 'No, thank you,' said Diana.

• 'No, thank you,' said Robin.

• 'Yes, thank you,' said Garstin, and refilled his glass and came over and sat by Diana. 'It's a good thing,' he added, 'to put away three before anything starts. Gives you control of the situation. But perhaps you'll find one enough.'

'Is he very rich?' Diana asked in a voice above a whisper.

• 'Who? Flossie? Stinks of it. Allowance, of course. He gets it on the condition he works on the paper. We share a room with five typists and the chucker-out, but I'm getting a shift up next month. Burrows, the Dramatic Critic, is clearing out to America, and that only leaves Cruikshank between me and the D.C., which means I cover the shows he can't. Mind you, I do first-nights now, when there's a spate of them, but Burrows puts his initials at the bottom. You'll probably meet a few actors to-night. It's how most of them get their supper. What do you think of the picture over the fire-place? Paid sixty quid for it. I wouldn't. That radiogram was a hundred and forty. Plays twenty-four records and turns 'em over itself.'

He suddenly raised his voice. 'Hey, Flossie, what you doing in that bathroom?'

The door opened and Mr. Carter came in, swathed in a quilted white-satin dressing-gown with his initials over the heart and his amber hair straggling over his eyes, which were the same shade of amber and merged. He was long and willowy, with no chin, far too much

nose and a broad brow (which made his face look like an inverted pea) and his mouth was small and tight, as in love-birds.

Came in? Swooped in sinuously.

'How *can* I apologize?' he demanded extravagantly. 'How *can* I apologize? I'm most *terribly* sorry not to be ready—you *do* forgive me, don't you? I only hope Woofie's been looking *after* you properly!'

'Diana Shand and Robin Gardner, reading from left to right,' said Garstin.

'But *how* do you do! I can't *tell* you how glad I am you've come!—it was quite, *quite* perfect of you!' said Mr. Carter, taking Diana's hand delicately and letting it go almost at once to take Robin's, which he held more enthusiastically. 'And you too, Robin—I *can* call you Robin, can't I?' Robin said yes he could, and tried to prise his hand loose, but wasn't able to. 'But for *heaven's* sake don't call me Flossie! The frightful Woofie made it up, and I *hate* it! Call me Everard—and you too, of course, Diana darling—and now you must all forgive me while I *rush* away and toss on an odd garment willy-nilly, and then I can come back and talk to you, respectably, you sweet creatures! . . . Oh, and I'm *frightfully* sorry about the way you had to let yourselves in . . . it was *too* maddening. . . . I sent Baker out to get fresh oysters, and he's been gone simply *hours*—Baker's my servant—but *quite* marvellous!—drives my car, cooks, valets, and plays the piano *divinely*—what I should do without him I hate to *think*! You *will* make yourselves at home, won't you? I mean, *really* at home! Woofie, bring me a gin and tonic, there's a dear. I won't be a *moment*!' He hunched his shoulders and squeezed up his eyes at Robin roguishly and was gone again, as sinuously as he had come, with lavender-laden air drooping in his wake.

Garstin grinned and went over to the cabinet. 'Can't say you didn't expect it,' he said delving for the tonic water. 'Not a bad fellow, Flossie. All bark and no dog.'

He mixed a generous gin and tonic and wandered off into the other room, where the sound of cupboards being opened and shut had begun in real earnest, and Flossie's voice was demanding of his Maker where Baker had hidden his drawers.

Left alone, Diana felt a shameful and sudden desire to laugh, and was a little distressed at wanting to laugh when there was nothing to laugh at—because one certainly oughtn't to laugh at people like Everard Carter if one had been properly brought up and had manners—and then caught Robin's eye, and saw he was wanting to laugh too, and had to look away again at once in case he did it out loud through being encouraged.

Garstin had begun talking to Everard in the bedroom, and Henry Hall was saying 'Gub-bye every wharn, gub-bye-eye!' on the white radio-gramophone, and the gin-and-lime was beginning to warm their insides, being seven parts gin to one of lime.

Then Robin suddenly realized that he had been job-hunting all day and had come home defeated, and hadn't told Diana yet, which sobered him up at once and stopped him wanting to laugh, and he wondered whether to tell her now or wait till they got home, and decided to wait, and then changed his mind almost immediately and decided to tell her now, and just as he was beginning it struck him that if she hadn't guessed the truth already she would have asked him herself, long ago; so he stopped and went round the room looking at the pictures instead, and Diana sat in a corner of the sofa (though after seeing Everard she wasn't so worried about leaving finger-marks on it) and picked up a book that was lying just in front of her and opened it in the middle.

'Goodness!' said Diana, shaken. 'Robin—come and look at these! No, don't,' she added quickly, shutting the book.

'What were they?' asked Robin curiously, quitting his tour.

'Nothing,' said Diana. 'At least, just pictures.'

'Rude ones?'

'Yes.'

'Have you ever,' he said, sitting down beside her, 'been in a place like this before?'

'Never. Have you?'

'No. Though I don't suppose there's another place like this anywhere else. Do you think he's mad? Harmlessly, I mean—sort of eccentric—or is it all for effect?'

Diana looked once round the room, frowning thoughtfully.

'If he was just doing it for effect, what effect would it be?' she asked at last. 'Because if you put it all together, it doesn't really mean anything.'

'No. Except a sort of Cecil de Mille bedroom. We'd probably like it if we saw it in a film. Nothing happened to-day, Diana,' he added in a small voice.

She dropped her hand lightly into his and squeezed it comfortingly.

'I didn't want it to,' she said. 'Because I'd miss you so much if you were away all day. And Garstin said we oughtn't to look for jobs until we've finished at the Studio. And I don't want to finish at the Studio. Not for a long time yet. Because I love you, and you're going to be terribly famous one day. You've got the Thing.'

They heard a key turn in the front-door lock downstairs and wriggled away from each other hastily.

Everard's voice rose up from the bedroom. 'Is that you, Baker?'

'Who else?' said a voice on the stairs.

'And did you get the oysters?'

'I should think I did,' said Baker's voice petulantly. 'After trying *every* shop in Fulham.'

'Poor Baker!' Everard sympathized. 'But quickly, quickly get the dinner. I'm *starving*!'

'I shall have to rest first,' returned Baker, with a touch of irritation. 'My feet are throbbing, and my neuralgia's come on again.'

'It's *simply* your imagination!' his master returned. 'Have a drink.'

At this minute Baker appeared at the door carrying a parcel. He looked like a film actor dressed to look like a butler, and was very pretty in a rococo sort of way.

'Oh, my goodness!' he said when he saw Diana and Robin. 'I beg your pardon. You didn't tell me any one had come,' he added loudly to the bedroom door. 'How was I to know?' He retired ruffled, and began banging pots about in the kitchen.

'It's another of them,' said Robin in a whisper. 'I don't believe we should have come.'

'I don't, either,' Diana agreed.

The wild possibility of abrupt escape occurred to them both, but was nipped in the bud by the reappearance of Everard, fully clothed and in his right mind. He looked better in a blue suit (though his tie was yellow foxheads against a mauve base) and he did at least have an amusing flow of conversation, though he talked about nothing at all at a very great rate.

He sat on the sofa between Robin and Diana, and kept brushing Robin's knees with his, and always brought home the point of his story by smacking Robin's knee lightly with his hand and leaving it there a minute or two after the smack, which was annoying, but not anything one could avoid by getting up and moving to one of the chairs without looking silly. Garstin sat on the arm of the sofa next to Diana and looked at the book of rude pictures. There was an air of brightness and jollity about it all that rang a little hollow if analysed, but could be passed if taken in the right spirit, and they each had two more gin-and-limes pressed on them, which they were too polite to refuse, and consequently felt a little drowsy by the time Baker put his head round the door and said dinner was served, and would they mind not dawdling about it as things would only get cold unless eaten immediately? and Garstin took Diana into the dining-room and Everard took Robin, and the dining-room was even more overpowering than the other room, being dark peacock blue and orange and only lit by candles on the table, which was laid for five.

It was a very narrow table indeed, and Garstin sat facing Diana and Robin facing Everard, who was still chatting amusingly about things of even less importance than before, and Baker served soup all round, and then sat down in the fifth place and asked Robin to kindly pass the toast when he had helped himself, and began his soup without any more ado.

At first Robin didn't really believe that Baker had sat down at all, as no one was taking the slightest notice of it, and refused to pass the toast to something existing only in his imagination, so Baker asked for the toast again in a louder voice, this time of Everard, who broke off in the middle of a story about the boy in the *Gay Debauch* chorus and reached for it at the same moment as Robin, so that the rack tipped over and sent the toast into Garstin's soup and the atmosphere was suddenly tense.

'I'm most terribly sorry,' said Robin, stricken, as Garstin removed the pieces with one hand and wiped his waistcoat with the other, 'I can't think what made me do that. I'm really very sorry indeed.'

'It's nothing, my dear, *absolutely* nothing!' said Flossie reassuringly. 'And don't think another thing of it! Baker can have bread instead; can't you, Baker?'

'I don't *want* bread,' Baker returned sulkily. 'I never eat bread. You *know* I never eat bread! I was looking forward to having a little toast with my soup, after going to all the trouble of making it in a hot stuffy kitchen while every one else drank and told stories.'

'There's still a lot in my soup,' Garstin offered. 'Change plates, Baker.'

'I *won't* change plates!' said Baker shrilly. 'Dirty, soggy toast! Pah!'

Everard tapped the table sharply with his fork

'Baker,' he said warningly, 'if there's going to be a *scene* I shall send you out of the room. Don't let me have to do that. We none of us want it.'

Baker's lip trembled ominously, but he cowered and was still.

Diana was sitting perfectly motionless, holding her

spoon in mid-air and looking with fixed intensity at the flower-piece in the middle of the table. Automatically her brain repeated, 'A Yogi would pretend he didn't notice anything. A Yogi would pretend he didn't notice anything.' Garstin leaned over and pushed her spoon with his finger.

'Leave the pretty flowers and sook oop soup, lass,' he said casually, as one who sees nothing untoward in hysterical butlers, and the matter-of-fact tone of his voice restored Diana's equilibrium, but not Robin's. He was conscious of having started acute domestic strife in Everard's home, and groped desperately for a means of making amends. Baker had begun to toy with his soup again, pink with self-pity, and Everard showed signs of letting the matter drop. Robin plunged his foot into it with sickening thoroughness.

'Perhaps,' he suggested ingratiatingly, 'I could make some more toast. I'm quite good at it.'

Baker's spoon dropped into the plate, and he rose quivering.

'I don't want,' said Baker in a high, strained voice, 'people fiddling about in my kitchen so that I don't know where anything is! It's quite obvious who's got to make the toast, so I may as well go and do it now!'

'Ah!' cried Everard angrily; 'I'm sick to *death* of hearing about this silly little toast! I never *heard* such a scene made about toast in the *whole* of my life!—the *whole* of my life! Stop it! Stop it this *minute*!'

'Do you mind not shouting?' Baker asked, white. 'I'm afraid I'm rather upset, and I really can't stand it, Mr. Carter! I'm very sorry, but there it is!'

'Finish your soup,' said Garstin from down the table, placidly.

'I don't *want* any soup! I don't want anything at all!' said Baker shrilly, and whirled on Robin. 'You shall have your toast!' he added magnificently, and went out of the room.

'Temperamental little bitch,' said Everard sulkily, under his breath.

Garstin finished his soup and pushed the plate a few inches away. 'Well, well, well,' he remarked conversationally. 'He may be the poifect servant, Flossie, but he needs a course of good old Anglo-Saxon botty-smacking. Do we clear away our own plates?'

'No,' said Everard quickly. 'He'll be *quite* all right when he comes back, as long as nobody mentions toast. *Simply* behave as if *nothing* had happened. I'm *frightfully* sorry this had to happen,' he added to Robin and Diara apologetically. 'Really *frightfully* sorry. I don't know *what* you must think of it all!'

Nor did Diana and Robin, and their faces said as much.

'All *too* embarrassing,' said Garstin with a broad grin. 'Quate frateful.'

'It's all because I went to *Gay Debauch* twice yesterday. There's always the most *ridiculous* scene afterwards and really it's all so *absurd*, because Frankie *adores* Baker, and he knows it, really, in his heart of hearts, though he simply won't say a *word* when Frankie comes here.' He gave a little fluttering sigh. 'It's all so *frightfully* difficult,' he added with a plaintive note in his voice, 'and so hard to know what to do for the *best*. What would *you* do, Robin? Without hurting any one's feelings, I mean—I couldn't *bear* to do that.'

Robin shifted restlessly in his seat and directed a hunted appeal to Garstin for help.

'It's no good asking him,' Garstin put forth in answer to the plea. 'He's as innocent as the sucking-dove, or sucker for short. You've frightened the eyebrows over the top of his head already. Ring for the next course. If you're sure it won't have powdered glass nestling in it.'

In answer to the bell Baker returned with a tray and removed the soup plates, tight-lipped, amid dead silence. The silence stretched over the time it took him to go back to the kitchen and fetch the oysters, distribute them, shoot Liverard a wounded look, and disappear again.

'Oughtn't you,' Diana suggested haltingly, after an uncertain pause, 'to ask him if he'd—like to sit down again?'

'Baker,' said Everard quietly, 'is being punished. Let's forget the *whole* incident, shall we?'

They ate the oysters in more silence.

'This can't go on,' said Robin's Inner Ego grimly. 'This can't go on. It must stop. I shall go mad. It isn't true. It's all a mistake. These things don't happen. I've been drugged with something in the gin-and-limes. May I go home, please, at once?'

Diana's Inner Ego caught the gist of it and radiated a fervent agreement. 'Thank goodness,' it semaphored back, 'you're here. It's only by concentrating on you that I can keep from bursting into tears. It *is* the others that are all wrong, and not us; isn't it? I'm beginning to get confused. I'm sure I shall cry in a minute. I hate it. May I go home too, please? At once?'

Robin's Self-Control, weary of its struggle against unfair odds, joined in. 'I can hold out a little longer,' it said; 'but I don't guarantee how long. The thing's killing me.'

Evil Genius Garstin, to whom all was apparent, hugged himself and ate salted almonds. It was his idea of a perfect evening. He didn't want it to stop. It was manna, frankincense, and myrrh to his soul; and oh, how he basked in it!

Revived by the oysters, Everard began another story about the boy in the *Gay Debauch* chorus, and how he was burned in the neck by a cigar while earning his place in the theatre, and rang for Baker with a forgiving spirit. Baker appeared, still mute, collected the plates, put a bottle of hock on the table, went out with the tray, was gone for a minute, and then appeared again with the toast-rack, which he deposited carefully and with the most pregnant significance down in front of Robin, who blushed furiously and looked at his waistcoat in shame. Everard said how much better a tap-dancer Frankie was than any one then living, and that one day London would discover this and kick itself for leaving him in the back row of a chorus for so many years. Baker came back with two trays, one with cold chicken and ham, the other with three kinds of salad.

'Hock?' said Everard.

'No, thank you,' said Diana.

'Robin?'

'No, thank you,' said Robin, gazing with unholy fascination at the toast.

'Hock?' said Everard to Garstin.

'Hock,' said Garstin in the affirmative.

'You may find the chicken tough,' said Baker to Diana in a coldly impersonal voice; 'and if so, while sorry, I take no responsibility. I left it in too long through being constantly distracted by Mr. Carter.'

Everard leaned forward a little.

'Garstin,' he said in a coldly impersonal voice, 'will you tell my butler that I am not in the habit of distracting menials engaged in their professional occupation?'

'Baker,' said Garstin obligingly, 'Mr. Carter is not in the habit of distracting menials engaged in their professional occupation.' He turned to Diana. 'I often have to do this,' he added pleasantly.

Baker took the trays round to Robin without uttering a cry.

Robin helped himself apologetically to an infinitesimal piece of chicken, but no ham as a penance. Baker raised his eyebrows and kept the tray down.

'The ham is excellent,' he suggested civilly. 'And goes very well with toast.'

'Will you *stop* mentioning toast?' shrieked Everard hoarsely, banging his hand on the table and glaring wildly. 'I'm going mad! Stop it, stop it, *stop* it!'

Baker carried the trays round to Garstin with superb disregard.

'Did you hear what I said, Baker?' his master pursued loudly, trembling.

'Will you tell Mr. Carter,' Baker requested Garstin measuredly, 'that I am not even partially deaf?'

'He's not even partially deaf, Flossie,' said Garstin willingly.

Everard rose slowly, but his eyes flashed fire.

'Go out,' he ordered between his teeth. 'Put that tray down, and—go—out!'

Without more ado Baker put the tray down noisily beside Garstin and walked stiffly to the door. Here he halted, and as deliberately as he knew how, turned, looked Everard up and down once, and then placed the thumb and middle finger of his right hand together and flicked them once in the air. Then, and only then, was he prepared to quit the room *victor ludorum*.

There was a hush in which nobody moved, and then Everard called him by name in new, honeyed tones.

'Baker,' he crooned. 'Ba-ker.'

There was another hush, and then Baker came back, magnanimous now.

'Yes?' he said.

'Baker,' said Everard evenly, 'you're sacked.' His voice quickened. 'You're sacked, Baker; do you understand? You're sacked! You don't have to come *back* any more! You're sacked! You're sacked! You're *sacked!*' which aired the gamut of his range, from contralto pianissimo to rich soprano.

'Shall I translate?' Garstin inquired (ever willing to fan a flame) but it seemed there was no need. Baker, not a whit put out, placed his hand on his hip and laughed in Everard's very face.

'La, you fantastic creature!' he said whimsically. 'What *would* you do if I took you at your word for once?'

'Do you often sack him?' asked Garstin interestedly.

'Every other day,' Baker supplied. 'The silly thing. And then tries to make it up with chocolates. And oh! what a surprise you'll get one day, when I take you at your word and go! Sit down and finish your hock.'

'Take this dish with you,' Garstin put in, 'if you're going.'

'Certainly,' said Baker, with a beaming smile, and did, and went.

'Shall we have the gramophone on?' suggested

Everard brightly, sitting again. 'I *adore* Ravel with supper! Do you like Ravel?'

'Yes,' said Diana, so automatically that Robin almost heard the click.

'Then we *will*,' said Everard, jumping up again, all sunshine. 'You do *know* the "Bolero" of course? Divine, divine, divine!' He skipped away into the other room. 'I call it my *theme* song.' There was a sound of records being shuffled, and a few noises of protests from the white radio-gramophone, and then the air was heavy with tom-toms. Everard came back starry-eyed.

'Oh, God,' said Robin's Inner Ego. 'It hurts, I tell you. Get me out of here!' He made a valiant attempt to keep his mind on the chicken and salad, but he had taken very little of it, and it was gone in no time, giving rise to a sudden acute hunger for more.

'*Wham* — tiddle — slam — tiddle-wham — slam — *crash*!'

'Isn't it *divine*?', demanded Everard ecstatically. 'But *really* divine?'

'It's a bit of nonsense,' said Garstin. 'And highly suggestive in theme.'

'But of *course*!' cried Everard. '*Exactly*! It's the most *divine* bit of nonsense! Do you know that once I saw it danced—in Paris—the most *divine* low haunt—full of Apaches!—by a man and a woman, and, my dear, not a *stitch* on except turbans, *either* of them! It was *quite* awful, but *absolutely* divine! And they ended up in the most *amazing* way—but *the* most amazing way, my dear, and right in the *very* middle of the floor, too—and believe me or not, may I *die* if I lie, the real thing, *absolutely* the real thing—I mean, one can *tell* if it isn't, and this *was*! Of course by then I was screaming—but actually *screaming*, my dear, though of course drunk.' He fell back in the chair, with a great sigh. '*Quite* divine,' he said dreamily.

'Filthy little beast,' said the Inner Ego angrily. 'Hit him with the flower-piece. Wring his craggy little neck. Push his face in with a boot. No one'll

miss it.' Robin looked anxiously at Diana. One look of encouragement and he would have fought Satanists ; but the entire commentary had gone sailing above her head. Diana hadn't been listening. Utter resignation had sealed her ears against the house of Everard. She was simply waiting until it was time to go home, and all her heart was longing for was the bed-sitting-room in Ebury Street and the sound of Miss Abernethy's thimble plopping.

'More food, Cock Robin?' inquired Garstin solicitously.

'No, thank you,' said Robin.

'Do these two darlings ever say anything except Yes and No, thank you?' Everard demanded playfully.

'Not unless you press Button A,' said Garstin.

'Then quickly, quickly show me where Button A is, and let me press it!'

'Not without a permit from the Lord Chamberlain, my pretty,' Garstin rejoined. 'Besides, they're still wearing "L" cards. Mustn't touch. I only brought them here to learn what sort of things inhabit London besides men and women, not to be initiated into Advanced Thought. Call your wage-slave. We're ready for the next course, if and when ready.'

Everard pressed the bell obligingly, and in answer Baker's face popped round the door.

'Did you ring?' he inquired briskly.

'No,' said Garstin. 'We fired a blank. Any sweets?'

'Chocolate meringues à la Russe.'

'Enough to go round?'

'And to spare.'

'Then why, you luscious morsel, aren't they going round now?'

'I haven't finished the meat course yet.'

'Well, finish it in here, and bring the meringues with you,' said Garstin.

'No,' said Baker coquettishly. 'I'm still upset.'

'Ah, nuts,' said Garstin crisply. 'Let's all go and eat in the kitchen then.'

'Certainly not!' Everard cut in decisively. 'Baker, bring the meringues and stop this *absurd* evasion! At *once*, now!'

The Bolero came to an end, and was switched on again automatically by the white radio-gramophone, which had a thousand pretty tricks, Garstin ate some more salted almonds, and Baker came back sulkily with the meringues.

'You'd *never* think it,' said Everard, catching Robin's knee between his own under the table and gripping it like a vice, 'but I have moments of *real* inspiration when I'm listening to the Bolero.' Robin pulled helplessly at his knee. It was clamped there for good. 'Only yesterday, while I was shaving, I suddenly got the first line to a poem—*simply* through listening to the Bolero. It goes like this:

"The moon hung, a pregnant belly in the sky."

It's *rather* fine, don't you think? I mean, it *means* something.'

'Sure,' said Garstin. 'It means you don't understand anatomy. I like your chocolate meringues à la Russe.' He stretched his foot out under the table and became entangled with Everard's and Robin's. 'Hey, nonny, no!' he said, with elaborate surprise. 'What's going on under here?'

'Absolutely *nothing*,' said Everard quickly. 'Absolutely nothing,' but he let Robin's knee go, and Robin nearly broke his leg trying to get it far enough out of the way to stop it happening again. Then the front door-bell rang.

'Reprieve! Reprieve!' sang the Inner Ego, reviving. They heard Baker trip downstairs and open the door, and the music of girlish laughter.

'That's Sadie and Doodoo!' said Everard happily, jumping up. 'Do excuse me! I *must* go and say hullo!' He skirmished out into the passage, and dulcet croons greeted him.

'How *can* I apologize?' they heard him demand

extravagantly. 'How *can* I apologize? I'm most *terribly* sorry not to have finished feeding—you *do* forgive me, don't you?'

From their noises Sadie and Doodoo obviously did.

'I can't *tell* you how glad I am you've come—it was quite, *quite* perfect of you!' They came through into the sitting-room. 'We're *just* finishing supper, and then I'll be able to talk to you *properly*, you sweet creatures! *Do* come and meet everybody—they're all in the dining-room?' He flung open the door and let in Sadie and Doodoo.

Sadie, the more arresting in every feature, was a tall brunette in a red woollen roll-top jersey and grey flannel trousers. She did lino-cuts and horrible little etchings in a studio near the Thames, and got away with it amongst a small clientele that was even more horrible than the etchings, which is saying a lot.

Doodoo's real name was Annie, which not even Sadie knew, and she was small, fat, pug-nosed, and pug-brained. She did modelling in the same studio, and badgered Sadie's clientele (though it never came to anything). She had only one claim to justification. She spent her life telling Sadie how marvellous she was. Is that a claim? Hollywood has its Yes-men. Let Sadie have her Doodoo. Neither of them matters two hoots to any one else. In its own way it has a quiet pathos.

'Look, darlings!' cried Everard richly. 'This is *Sadie*, and *this* is Doodoo! That's Robin and that's Diana, and of *course* you know Woofie!'

'Hallah, Woofie,' nodded Sadie in substantiation. 'Har yah?'

'Garnd,' said Garstin. 'Har yah?'

'Would you like a cup of coffee, Sadie sweet? Baker's *just* making it,' Everard inquired.

'By Gad, rathar!' said Sadie gluttonously.

'And the little woman too?' asked Garstin.

'Yeth pleath,' said Doodoo in a voice like an egg-nog.

'Ba-ker,' Everard sang. 'Two extra coffees.'

'I heard,' Baker's voice came back. 'I can hear every *word* in that room from here.'

'Thought you'd sacked Bakah?' said Sadie.

'He has,' Garstin assured her. 'Matinéés Tuesdays and Thursdays. That's a very fine piece of wool you're wearing, Sadie. Swastika-stitch, isn't it?'

'Thadie *ithn't* a Jeweth, Garstin!' Doodoo asserted hotly. 'That nose ith *Gweek!* *Any one* can thee it! *My*, you are wude!'

'Up, the Middlesex Regiment!' said Garstin encouragingly. 'Flossie, can we have the Bolero now? That record's just starting its fifth Farewell Appearance, in case I go cuckoo.'

'I *shan't* take off my divine Bolero for *any one*,' said Everard defiantly, and turned to Sadie. 'How's the work, Sadie darling?'

'Ah, I dunno,' said Sadie gruffly. 'Turned aht one or two little things this week, ya know. Nothing Big.'

'Now that *ithn't* twue, Thadie!' Doodoo reproved. 'What about the ething—"Genethith"? I think *ith's* a mathterpiethe. Vewy Wembwant, Flothie.'

'Pshaw!' Sadie discounted airily. 'Just turned it aht, ya know. Nothing much. Whelse's comin' to-night?'

'I don't *know*, my dear! Simply *bordes* of people! They always *do*!'

'I alwyth thay Flothie holdth a 'Thalon. Ith not a party,' said Doodoo.

Everard laughed depreciatingly, but preened himself.

'I must say, I do have *most* of the Great here,' he admitted. 'Divinely brilliant things—*such* fun for poor me, who can't create one *single* tiny thing!'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Garstin. 'I guess you could rise to an etching of Genesis.' Baker came in with a tray of coffee-cups.

'Ith all vewy fine to be tharcathtic, Woofie,' Doodoo came down severely. 'At leatht Flothie *ithn't* a Dethecrater of the Thacred like you!'

‘Oh, but how right you are!’ said Baker feelingly. ‘How *right*!’

Doodoo bounced round in her chair and wreathed smiles at her champion. ‘*And* thordid, Baker!’ she said enthusiastically. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘Phallic,’ nodded Baker.

‘You two ought to go away somewhere quiet and compare souls,’ Garstin encouraged. ‘They’re twins.’

‘Impadhent young cub,’ said Sadie tolerantly. ‘Got a cigarette, Flossah?’

‘My, my,’ said Garstin. ‘Gone off your meer-schaum? Nicotine poisoning, Sadie, or did you get kicked at soccer practice?’

‘I don’t know why you let him come here, Flothie,’ Doodoo remarked warmly. ‘He’th not really one of uth, and he *ith* tho cheap and wanthid!’

‘He makes me laugh,’ Everard explained.

‘And I don’t do so badly myself,’ Garstin supplemented. ‘Especially when you and Sadie trollop in to talk Art.’

The door-bell pealed again, and Baker left to open it. Sadie was eyeing Diana covertly, and Diana felt exactly as if a sergeant-major were ogling her in the park. She looked across at Robin, who had noticed it too, and to comfort her he winked hard with the eye farthest from Sadie.

‘I *thaw* you do that,’ said Doodoo accusingly, with certain relish, but in a low voice.

‘Do what?’ Robin asked limply.

‘Wink at her.’

‘And why shouldn’t he?’ Garstin demanded. ‘They’re engaged.’

The anxiety flitted from Doodoo’s face, and she smiled fatuously. ‘Oh, *weally*?’ she said. ‘How quaint!’

Sadie rolled her cigarette into a corner of her mouth and volleyed from the other. ‘Good gad!’ she said forcefully.

‘Good gad what?’ asked Garstin.

'Lot of damn nonsense,' said Sadie, stiff with disapproval. 'Plain as a pikestaff. The girl's only attracted to him because he's more than half feminine, and he's attributing her with the qualities of a boy because she's small and slight. It's downright abnormal!'

Robin, with his face scarlet, half rose and was pushed gently back into his chair by Garstin before he knew it.

'All right,' said Garstin pacifically. 'Don't waste your breath. Your Uncle Garstin's here to see there's no rough stuff.' He turned to Sadie. 'Sadie, my love,' he said pleasantly, 'Diana's the only person you'll meet here to-night who doesn't want to come back to your flat and see your etchings. On guard, Doodoo!'

Baker's voice came up the stairs.

'Mr. Carter,' he called, 'it's Mr. Brughoffner!'

'My dear!' Everard shrilled. 'Make him come up at once! Oh, the lovely, wicked man!' He hurried to the door.

'Horrible creature!' said Sadie. 'Drinks cat's blood at midnight and sleeps in a glass coffin. Invokes the Devil. Lot of dam' nonsense!'

'Unnatcherwal,' Doodoo confirmed. 'Oogh! He givth me the cweeps!'

'How *can* I apologize?' a well-remembered voice gave tongue. 'How *can* I apologize? I'm *terribly* sorry not to have finished coffee—you *do* forgive me, don't you, you *naughty* old man?' Something grunted amicably, and Everard went on, 'I can't *tell* you how glad I am you've come—it was quite *perfect* of you!' He appeared in the door with a diminutive German Jew locked in a half-Nelson embrace. 'People,' he announced, 'this is Kurt Brughoffner!'

'Good night!' said Herr Brughoffner, with a fat little bow.

'Heil, Hitler!' said Garstin, raising the wrong arm with a flourish.

'Nein!' said Herr Brughoffner quickly. 'Dammit, yes? Pah! I speet!'

He had obviously been invented by Walt Disney,

but was pre-Technicolour and quite hairless, even down to simple necessities like eyelashes. His face was smooth and white and shaped like a knitting-basket, and his teeth were whiter than his face, beautifully even and unblushingly false. His only decorations apart from this were his pince-nez and a cleft in his chin. His coat and trousers came from different stables, and gave him the appearance of a statue pending unveiling, and he wore tennis shoes tied with string. He kissed Diana's hand on presentation, and Doodoo's, but got a handshake from Sadie that made him sag at the knees. Everard dragged a chair up and arranged him carefully in between Garstin and Robin. He smelt robustly of very old sauerkraut.

'And now, you *frightening* man,' said Everard, wriggling into his chair, 'what was the last frightful wickedness you did?'

Herr Brughoffner waved his hands deprecatingly as one loath to hurl a pall over a happy scene.

'Ah now, *not* to tantalize!' Everard urged excitedly. 'Is it *quite* unmentionable?'

'On Wednesday,' said Herr Brughoffner, allowing him to judge for himself, 'I had speakings mit a wampire.'

'Not a real one?' demanded Baker, who had brought another coffee-cup.

'Bot ja, ja!' said Brughoffner. 'I myself und two of my priests. Me, I am der Heigh Priest. First we wass speakings mit der Tefle, den mit der wampire.'

'Ith it twue,' asked Doodoo with unsteady breath, 'that you theep in a glath coffin?'

Herr Brughoffner directed a Bela Lugosi stare at her, which caused a minor furore.

'Bot of gorse,' he said in a sibilant voice. 'Allvays.'

'And—dwink cat'h blood?' Doodoo pursued, a lot unsteadier.

'Vy nod?' asked Herr Brughoffner, narrowing his eyes to the merest slits.

'There!' said Doodoo to Garstin, her eyes like door-knobs.

Garstin stumped his cigarette in Sadie's coffee and leaned forward with his elbows on the table. 'Tell me, Herr Brughoffner, as one Satanist to another, don't you find cats very hard to catch?' he inquired. 'I do!'

'Nein,' said Herr Brughoffner stiffly. 'I mesmerizings dem mit mine eyes, ain't it?'

'I remember once,' continued Garstin in a dreamy voice, 'spending a whole night trying to catch a cat; and all the priests waiting to start and everything, and simply panting for a chat with Satan; and try as I could, not a cat'd look at me twice.'

'So what you done?' asked Herr Brughoffner, with a note of sympathy in his voice.

'We used a mouse instead.'

'Did it work?' asked Baker anxiously.

'Well it did and it didn't,' said Garstin, giving him a Bela Lugosi stare too. 'We weren't able to speak to Satan, but we got two poltergeists and an Astral Wind, which wasn't bad on one mouse.'

There was a slight pause, in which Herr Brughoffner studied him under working brows.

'Well, *really* Garstin!' said Everard, exasperated. 'There are *some* things one *doesn't* joke about!'

'It'th thacrilidge!' Doodoo added, deeply shocked. Sadie crushed her out of the conversation in a trice.

'Don't talk nonsense, Doodoo,' she said brusquely. 'I'm beginning to think bettah of Garstin than I did. Garstin stood up, dropped her a bow, and sat down again. 'Cats are no subject for a dinnah-table. Not when I'm at it, anyway, by gad!'

'Wade, please, woon minutes,' Herr Brughoffner interrupted throatily, his eyes fixed on Garstin. 'Told me,' he asked precisely, 'if you was dinking to making funnies wid me, isn't? It yes, I 'ave been insult. Please, why?'

'But of *course* he didn't mean to insult you, Herr Brughoffner!' Everard intervened hastily. 'It's *just* our English humour—you mustn't *mind*!'

'English humour my fanny,' said Garstin calmly. 'It's true, every word.'

'Den I *was* insult!' said Herr Brughoffner with flashing eyes. 'I am called liars, ain't it?'

'Look,' said Garstin peaceably; 'if you drink anything stronger than tea and sleep in anything creepier than a truckle-bed with your pants under the mattress, it was me had the Dionne quintuplets, and I'll do it again before I go home for good measure.'

'Garthin!' cried Doodoo in shrill horror. 'Be *careful*! He'll *curth* you!'

'Shut *up*, Doodoo,' said Sadie curtly.

Herr Brughoffner had risen to his tennis shoes, panting.

'Excuse, please. I go home,' he said with carefully controlled rage. 'I do not brought here to be insult, that's what I am!'

As he obviously had no intention of going home, Everard, Baker, and Doodoo formed a Triple Entente and gradually eased him back into his chair, though a great deal of energy went to it, and Baker had his foot trodden on by Doodoo before it was all over.

'I think the *least* you can do,' said Everard, a little out of breath, and genuinely annoyed, 'is to *apologize*, Garstin!'

'Not a hope,' said Garstin, though nicely.

'But it really *is* going too far,' Everard insisted, really roused, and temporarily arresting. 'We *do* give you a lot of licence, Garstin, because we have, after all, better senses of humour than *ordinary* people, *and* broader valuations, but your behaviour to Herr Brughoffner just now is, to *my* mind, a *depressing* example of what vulgar follies may be perpetrated by those with *no* sense of tradition or reverence!' He was shaking with the fervour of a strange sincerity.

'But how right!' said Baker emphatically. 'How *absolutely* right!'

Everard gave him a quick look of appreciation and proceeded steadily. 'Let us *leave* poetry and even obscenity out of count, for your indecorums have no Elizabethan gusto, and still there is the width of the *world* between the extravagant adolescent excitements

of broad humour and your loutish gibes and desperate attempts to show that there is something funny *per se* in cults and sexual intercourse. Let me tell you, Garstin, that our age is *filled* with lost souls like you, to whom everything appears to be equally funny because equally futile!' He looked round for plaudits expectantly. Doodoo and Baker were gazing at him admiringly. Robin and Diana were gazing at their coffee-cups, Herr Brughoffner was wishing he'd been able to follow, and Sadie was blowing smoke rings with her head back.

'I am not,' said Garstin mildly, 'a lost soul. I am a very much all-there soul. I can't think of any one with a better chance of going either to Heaven or Hell when I die. But my point is that if Nature provided the world, she runs Heaven and Hell as annexes. Thus, if you offend her in this world, you'll offend her there too. Well, apart from one or two experiments that fell flat, I've got on very well with Nature. But you and Sadie haven't. You've as good as told Nature she doesn't know her business, and you've shown her how to improve on it. That's why I don't think she'll want you in Heaven or Hell, which leaves Mars and Venus, and you can have 'em. I don't laugh at everything and I don't think everything futile; but I laugh at you and Sadie—and at Herr Brughoffner's coffin and cats—because if I didn't laugh, I'd cry with pity for you.'

There was a dead and alarming stillness in the room. Robin and Diana gazed at him with unconcealed amazement, trying to link him up with the Garstin they knew and wanted to kick, and wondering how much longer he had to live. The rest of the room were staring at him too, with an open hostility. Sadie again crushed an outburst of hysterical onslaught. She tilted her chair back and said in a hard, even voice, 'Go on, Garstin.'

Garstin accepted the invitation. 'Sadie's the only one of you here who knows she's futile,' he said. 'And she's the only one here who isn't frightened.'

'Frightened of what?' said Everard in a flat voice.

'Of growing old.'

'I'm not frightened,' said Everard. 'I wouldn't be

any different, even if I had the choice. You people hate us because we get more out of life than you do—more excitement, more artistic appreciation, deeper knowledge, because we aren't chained to an obsolete animal instinct. I'm not frightened of something just because it's in advance of mass civilization. It's glorious not to be one of a thousand million morons doing and saying and thinking the same things and living in a state of mental constipation.'

'You'd give all you've got to be one of a thousand million morons,' Garstin returned, 'all four of you. And you know I'm right, what's more.'

Robin realized subconsciously that the 'Bolero' was still playing in the other room.

'Well,' said Everard with a lopsided smile, 'as long as we *know*, we *can't* say you didn't *warn* us! Sadie, more coffee?'

'No,' said Sadie, blowing more smoke rings.

'Doodoo?' Doodoo shook her head, too full of hysterical rage to speak.

'Herr Brughoffner?'

'Nein, dank you.' He still had his eyes fixed on Garstin. 'Tolding me,' he said precisely, 'if you wass thinking me as well also futile, isn't?'

'I've said enough,' said Garstin. 'I want to see the sky and the trees again, and hear birds sing. And Doodoo's going to jab me neatly with a fruit-knife any moment.'

Everard gave a high laugh.

'What *utter* nonsense!' he said lightly. 'As if any of us had taken you *seriously*, you absurd thing!'

'Me, please, yes,' Herr Brughoffner corrected, doggedly. 'I haf been unsult. Please, why?'

'Because you live in a very respectable Bloomsbury boarding-house, and the only way you can keep it from crushing you is to talk Black Magic until your bed really does look like a glass coffin and your milk of magnesia runs red. If we took your Black Magic away from you and told you to go back and look at your room again, you'd die first, rather than see it as it is in reality. Look

at Doodoo. If she had a sense of humour she'd realize that Sadie's etchings'd disgrace an idiot boy, and that Sadie isn't a handsome gentleman in shooting tweeds and a blonde moustache; and if she realized that there'd be nothing left. Your whole lives are one elaborate excuse for avoiding reality, because you know that the minute you touched it you'd find yourselves out.'

'I think,' said Baker quietly from behind, 'that I'm going to faint.'

The front door-bell rang again.

'No,' said Garstin. 'You're going to let in the quorum.'

CHAPTER V

Assorted Quorums

BEFORE I go on, I have a word of cheer for those to whom the last chapter must have been as brimstone. They can safely skip this one (unless they intend hurling the book from them and writing a stiff note to the librarian and possibly me) because it deals with more of the party. To those stoics who are loyal still, I say bear with me. This chapter has to be written; it has its bearing. (And I'm being very honest. These things happen.)

With the fresh shoal let in by Baker came a lessening of the tension. The new-comers came more or less under the Everard and Sadie schools without attaining the same high standard of individuality, being content to run in coveys rather than stand out on their own merits. They gradually filtered into the white room until it was thick with cigarette smoke and clashing perfumes, switched off the 'Bolero' and switched on Duke Ellington, started a run on the cocktail cabinet that threatened to milk it dry within the quarter, talked loudly, shrilly, importantly and continuously, were never listened to and never listened to any one, and embraced every one indiscriminately.

Everard appeared to know them all intimately, and rushed excitedly from one covey to another, incoherent with endearments and hearty welcomes, and was obviously in his element; and Diana and Robin escaped from Garstin, while he was being rude to a Marcel wave in a ready-made tie, and found a window-seat which very nearly hid them, where they remained for hours trying desperately to think of a vital reason for going home.

In an ever-diminishing space, about five foot square to begin with, some of the hardier ones had begun dancing. By far the most proficient were Sadie and Doodoo with an extremely intricate tango—though Duke Ellington was playing a very deliberate slow fox-trot—and a lot of very admiring things were being said about them from all round. Herr Brughoffner, seized with the sudden ecstasy of Dance, began revolving meditatively on his toes and from that slid into a gyration—though slower than Duke Ellington's—with his arms embracing an imaginary cornucopia. Occasionally he hit Sadie and Doodoo, or Sadie and Doodoo hit him. Nothing, however, broke his ecstasy of Dance. Long after the record came off and Sadie and Doodoo had retired from the floor to plaudits, Herr Brughoffner and his cornucopia were hard at it.

About half an hour later, when Robin remembered and looked again, Herr Brughoffner was still in his ecstasy of Dance. To facilitate movement he had, however, removed his trousers. This was quite in order, as he wore others beneath.

The busy chatter all about was split now and then by a shrill staccato cry of pleasure from Everard, either to precede a joke or give colour to a tale of scandal fresh to his ear, and Garstin (who had had too much to drink by now) joined forces with a small brunette in a green satin dress and nothing underneath. They sat on the piano and became deeply engrossed in something, and a few minutes later disappeared.

'Robin,' said Diana, 'I want to go home, even if it is rude. Now, Robin.'

'I'll tell Everard,' said Robin firmly, and climbed off the window sill.

He ran Everard to earth on the sofa, hidden underneath the Marcel wave, who was reclining on him and twiddling his hair, which Everard obviously liked.

'Excuse me,' said Robin politely, 'but Miss Shand and I will really have to be going, Mr. Carter. We just wanted to thank you very much indeed for having us.'

'But *what* nonsense!' cried Everard, rising to an elbow, which caused the Marcel wave to shift moorings. 'Why, the party hasn't even *begun* yet! You can't *possibly* go! *What* nonsense! Isn't the horrid little Woofie looking after you properly?'

'Oh, yes,' said Robin quickly; 'but we've got to be up early to-morrow and——'

'Not another *word*!' Everard ordered. 'You must be *introduced* to everybody at once, *at once*! And where *is* Woofie?' He sat up. 'Baker! Where's Woofie?'

Baker broke away from a tussle with a small red-headed man with a beard for a moment.

'In the bedroom,' he said, 'with Gilly.'

The little man with the beard, catching Baker unguarded, popped a kiss on his cheek, and darted away across the room.

'*Oh!*' said Baker furiously. 'Did you *see* that!' and flew in pursuit.

'We'll go and fetch Woofie,' said Everard decisively, and dragged Robin towards the bedroom door.

'But you can't!' Robin exclaimed, dragging back. 'You heard what he said. It'd be much easier just for us to go home now, quietly——'

At this moment Everard suddenly caught sight of Herr Brughoffner, and gave an eldritch shriek.

'You *naughty* old man!' he cried. 'What *have* you done with your panties?' Without more ado Herr Brughoffner caught him round the waist, and away they waltzed, to the strains of 'Woon-du-dree! Woon-du-dree! Woon-du-dree!' until the crowd had swallowed them up. Robin looked round helplessly for Diana,

who had left the window-seat, and was about to find her and escape, without even asking Baker where his coat was, when the bedroom door opened, Garstin's arm came out, caught him by the shoulder, and dragged him in backwards, slamming the door.

At first the room was too dark for him to see anything except Garstin in his shirt. 'Never say,' said Garstin with a tipsy deliberation in his ear, 'I don' do every-thing for you, Cock Robin. Wantcha t'meet lil fren' o' mine—fren' o' mine who wans meet you——'

'Look, Garstin,' said Robin urgently, 'we were just going. I came to tell you——'

'Goin'?' Garstin exclaimed with owlish disapproval. 'You can't go, Cock Robin! You gotta stay an' sturry typsh—study types—types! . . . Gotta type here for you to sturry—Gilly Annerson—meet nold frenner mine, Cock Robin.'

'Lo-o!' said a voice cordially, from the darkness. 'Come on over here,' Cock Robin, and say howdy. I can't see you properly.'

Garstin pushed him across the room obligingly, and a pair of hands came out of the gloom and pulled at him so that he lost his balance and fell across the corner of Everard's bed on to something warm. He leaped away, startled out of his life, but the hands kept a firm hold of his. He pulled more urgently, realizing at that moment that Diana might be suffering the same sort of thing in the other room, and that he must get to her at once. 'Let me go, *please!*' he begged. 'I've got to go!' which met with hearty mirth. He felt ridiculously incapable of dealing with the situation, and a sort of trapped frenzy began to grow inside him. Then the hands suddenly released him and two arms caught him firmly round the neck instead, and a hot little face was pressed against his and he felt his nose being licked. With a mighty effort he heaved himself backwards. The next minute he was on the floor with Gilly Anderson on top of him and her teeth buried in his ear. He cried out to Garstin for help in his hour of need, and saw his folly too late. There was a wild whoop from Garstin

a sudden whirlwind of flying arms and legs, Gilly's voice ordering Garstin to remove his clothes while she held his arms, a sudden loud crack as his head hit the parquet floor, and then everything went very blank until a far-away voice began singing something nasal about his not being dead and being *perfectly* all right in a minute if they wouldn't *crowd* round him, and he heard Diana crying, and his head was aching so much that he didn't know what to do, and the lights were on and he was lying on the bed and they'd been pouring water on his face and it had soaked through his shirt and trickled down to his tummy, and he remembered about having his ear bitten, but not very much else, except that he and Diana had to get out of here as quickly as they could.

'*There* you are, you see?' said Everard triumphantly. 'He's opening his eyes, you see? He'll be *perfectly* all right if you just *leave* him—*everybody, please!*—and go into the other room! Baker, *make* them!' There was a lot of jumbled chatter and scuffling, and then a door shut and Everard said: 'I *can't* tell you how sorry I am, *really*,' and meant it; 'and I'll never allow Garstin *near* me again, *or* the horrible little bitch in green! Sadie threw her out—but *threw* her out, my dear!—and I hope she broke her *neck!*—and here's the aspirin, and if you want anything just call Baker or me, and don't *dream* of moving him until he's *absolutely* all right again, and I'd give *anything* for it not to have happened!' And then his voice faded away, and Robin found that Diana was holding him in her arms with his head against her breast and still crying a little, and he tried to say something about his hair being wet and spoiling her dress, but when he tried his head hurt a great deal more than he would have thought possible, and Diana whispered to him at once not to talk, and kissed him very softly on the lips and smoothed her cheek against his very gently, and rocked him a little, so that after a while the pain in his head didn't seem so bad after all (though his ear was beginning to throb) and if getting hit on the head meant being held in Diana's arms and treated

like a baby, he didn't mind getting hit on the head again, once this one was all over, because it was definitely worth it. Then he heard Diana saying something about it all being her fault, and that she wouldn't forgive herself ever, and he opened his eyes wide at once and said that it wasn't her fault at all, and not to let him catch her saying anything so ridiculously absurd again or there'd be a scene, and she buried her face in the space between his shoulder and left ear and cried helplessly, so that after a while, with a little shifting, Robin took her in his arms instead, and they held each other very tightly and were almost happy again; except for the bite in Robin's ear, which was stinging like fury, and the bump on the back of his head, which was throbbing as regularly as the thing he once did piano scales to; and Diana's sense of responsibility for it all, being Garstin's cousin, and the terrible fright she had had when Gilly had screamed hysterically for help, and she had seen Robin lying on the floor and wasn't sure whether he was breathing because he looked so white and still.

Then there was a knock on the door, and the first time they ignored it and hoped the person would go away; but when the person knocked again a minute later, Diana felt she had to let him come in, being in some one else's house, and straightened up and said, 'Come in,' in an unencouraging voice, and was prepared to fight any one on the slightest provocation. The door opened and a young man came in. She didn't remember having seen him in the other room. He looked kind and well-meaning, but at the moment all men in that house were enemies to Diana, and she gazed at him mistrustfully across Robin.

'Is he all right again?' asked the young man sympathetically.

'Yes, thank you,' said Robin in an unconvincing voice.

'Well, look,' said the young man, 'I've got my car outside, and I'm longing to get away from here, so will you let me take you home?'

Diana and Robin gave him a quick summing-up and decided he was with but not of the revellers, and meant what he said.

'That'd be very kind of you,' said Diana gratefully. 'Would you?'

'Hang on,' the young man returned, 'while I get my coat, and we'll clear out right away—unless you'd like to rest a bit more?'

'Oh no, thanks!' said Robin quickly. 'I'd much sooner go home! Would you very kindly get my coat too? It's an old navy blue one with the bottom button off and a grey woollen scarf in the pocket.'

The young man said he would, and disappeared, and Robin very slowly and carefully got up and walked a few steps (whereupon the water on his chest at once trickled down into his trousers and was most uncomfortable) and Diana put his collar on and tied his tie and helped him on with his jacket and brushed his hair back with her fingers and mopped him up as well as she could with her handkerchief and assured him that his ear was still intact except for teeth-marks and hardly bleeding at all, because Everard had put iodine on it the minute he saw it, which amazed Robin, who had somehow become convinced that the lobe was quite bitten off, and that he was going to look a freak for the rest of his life; and then the young man came back with his coat and helped him into it, and they went through the bathroom into the passage and were able to get out of the house without any one seeing them go.

The young man's car was a very old Austin two-seater and had to be cranked before it would start, and Diana sat between him and Robin, all amongst the gear-levers, which left her with nowhere to put her feet, but she was feeling so grateful to the young man for getting them away from the party that she would have willingly sat on the mudguard and not dreamed of criticizing anything. The young man's name was Christopher Lovell, and he was one of the actors who had come for his supper and not because he liked Everard's parties, and was about thirty. He explained that he had brought

the girl in the green satin dress, but only because she had met him at another party and made him, and that there was absolutely nothing between them, and how conscious-stricken he had felt when she and Bannock had started getting drunk and brawling, and how he had noticed Robin and Diana in the window-seat, and wondered how on earth they had got there and felt sorry for them, but hadn't spoken to them because he was doubtful of the impression they would get at being addressed by a total stranger at a party they were obviously hating; and Diana told him the whole story from Garstin's appearance in Ebury Street, and he listened very sympathetically.

· 'And now I suppose you think every one in London's a potential Carter under the skin?' he inquired, when she had finished.

'Oh no!' said Diana quickly.

'Are they?' asked Robin, who had less trust in human nature since the bump on his head.

'Very nearly,' said Lovell. 'In the theatre, anyhow. Most of them keep it to themselves, though. You got in amongst extremists to-night.'

'Are you *sure*?' asked Diana after a pause, aghast.

'I'll admit to being prejudiced,' the young man granted. 'I've been out of work two years. I'm not a bad actor, either. It's that I'm out of fashion. I've had jobs whipped away from under my nose by funny little creatures belonging to the leading man or the management more times than I like to remember. I tell you,' he said warmly, forgetting Diana for a second, 'half the young men in the theatre slide into their jobs on their stomachs, and the frightening thing is, that they're not booed by the gallery the moment they open their mouths on a first night. There's a sort of dry rot in the theatre, or they'd never be able to get away with it. They're so strong now that nothing short of a Pogrom à la Hitler'll ever clean 'em out. And the gallery-girls adore them—no other instinct gone wrong or something. It's the vogue to be precious and anæmic, and God help you if you're not. The more inaudible and sloppy you

are and the more you waggle your backside the more they like you. Begging your pardon,' he added to Diana, 'and pretend I haven't said a word. Which end of Ebury Street is it?' and was almost there as he spoke.

When they had thanked him very warmly and watched him drive away into the fog and let themselves into the hall and looked to see if there were any letters, Diana said firmly: 'You're to go straight and have a hot bath, and as soon as you're in bed I shall bring you two aspirins, and you're not to get up to-morrow if your head aches, and you've got to promise me you won't, Robin,' and Robin went straight upstairs and had a hot bath (which took a long time to fill, as he only let the taps trickle so as not to wake any one) and went back to the bedroom and tidied his clothes away and got into bed and then leaped out again almost immediately and brushed his hair (very gingerly at the back) and looked to see if there was any gas left in the meter and found there wasn't, and climbed back into bed again, sitting very upright, and waited for Diana and the two aspirins, and thought about Christopher Lovell being out of work for two years. Then Diana tiptoed up the stairs and tapped on his door, and he whispered that she could come in, and she did and closed the door conspiratorially behind her and came and sat on the edge of his bed while he took the aspirins with a glass of hot water, and then patted his hand as if he had done something extremely brave.

'Diana,' he said suddenly, 'did you believe what he said about—the queer people being in all the jobs?'

'No,' said Diana firmly. 'He's probably just very bitter about being out of work for so long, because any one would be, and doesn't really mean what he says.'

'I suppose not,' said Robin; 'but I just feel that everything in London's all queer and crooked at the moment, and we'll get like it too if we stay.'

'There're *hundreds* of people who aren't queer and crooked,' said Diana with energy, 'and all we have to do is to think about them and not about the people that are, and it'll be perfectly all right. Goodness, there're

millions of people who aren't queer and crooked—simply millions and millions!—and you've got to think about *them* and not about a few silly little nobodies like we saw to-night, who just don't matter at all, and now you're going to go to sleep and not worry about anything, and I'm going to stay here beside you until you *do*.' And although Robin protested at once that she couldn't possibly stay beside him until he went to sleep, and that it wasn't as if he was ill or anything and it'd make him feel a fool and selfish and she would get terribly cold not having any gas-fire, Diana settled him comfortably so that the bump and the car-bite gave minimum trouble and tucked him in and kissed him on the cheek and sat down very patiently and waited for him to go to sleep, so of course Robin pretended to go to sleep almost at once; though as soon as Diana had tiptoed away and closed the door without making a sound, he opened his eyes and lay gazing at where the ceiling ought to be more or less, and thought about Christopher Lovell being out of work for two years, and actors and managers giving parts to funny little creatures who slid into their jobs on their stomachs.

CHAPTER VI

Hist ho ! A letter !

A POLTERGEIST was whistling the 'Bolero' in his car, and it was cold and very dark. He was wearing tennis-shoes tied with string and a red jumper covered with swastikas that revolved like Catherine wheels, and two people were dancing in turbans. 'Of course, it's *quite* absurd!' said the cat, stopping short to address him. 'But they *do* drink it, so *what's* one to do? Here to-day and *gone* to-morrow, my dear!' and nodded affably and vanished in a puff of cigarette smoke.

'That's Sadie's doing,' said the Poltergeist with a touch of irritation. 'Or perhaps a mouse. There's

a sort of dry rot in the theatre, or they'd never be able to get away with it.'

Five young men with wavy hair slid past on their stomachs, pursued by Everard with a feather duster and a scent-spray.

'Divine, divine, divine!' he called out to Robin, and fell headlong into a glass coffin, which immediately snapped shut and walked away.

'Wancha to meet a lil fren' o' mine!' said Garstin suddenly, emitting sparks and breathing sulphur. 'You gotta study typsh!' He was covered with a metallic red sheen, and had two small horns growing out of his head and a forked tail from behind, and Doodoo was shuffling toast.

'You needn't think,' said Baker contemptuously, 'that we've lost Herr Brughoffner's trousers. We put them in the white radio-gramophone, and they played *Bells Across the Heather*.'

'Take a card,' said Doodoo, holding out the toast fanwise. 'Any card.'

'It's those swastikas,' Garstin said evilly. 'They must come away.' He stretched out a long red claw and the red jumper vanished.

'Well, my gudeness!' said Miss Abernethy in horror. 'The boy's neyked! Oot you go, you and your high-water marks, or I'll call the coal-man!'

'Frenner mine,' said Garstin. 'Gotter sturry typsh. Hey, Gilly!'

Everard rushed up excitedly. 'Did anybody call me?' he asked, and clapped his hands together.

'No,' said Doodoo, 'but take a card. Baker'th *furiously*!' Whereupon Everard vanished again and Herr Brughoffner paused in his waltz and leaned forward. 'Be careful!' he called warningly, 'you haf speakings mit a vampire, isn't?'

Gilly slipped her arms round his neck and gazed up at him alluringly. 'Isn't he absurd?' she remarked. 'But *quite* absurd, my dear!' He felt her body pressing against him like a hot-water bottle, and tried to shake her off, but couldn't move at all, and the cat paused on

its way back and nodded affably. 'I told you they drank it,' it said knowingly. 'Anæmic and precious, precious and anæmic, but the gallery-girls love it, so what's one to do?' and vanished again.

Then Garstin caught him by the ear and tore it off very slowly, though Miss Abernethy beat his claw with a giant thermometer and called loudly to Number Four that he was wanted on the telephone; and Doodoo rushed forward with a piece of toast and asked if it would do instead. Then Gilly began pushing him over backwards and beating her knees on his in time to the 'Bolero,' and Garstin put his face very close and laughed at the top of his voice, and then caught Robin's head and banged it up and down on the lid of the glass coffin as hard as he could, so that it made an incredible noise and he opened his eyes.

Diana knocked again, and then pushed the door open and peeped round.

'Robin,' she called gently. 'Is the headache gone?'

Robin raised his head a quarter of an inch off the pillow, blinked dazedly, and nodded to see what would happen. Nothing did.

'Yes,' he said. 'Quite.'

'Are you *sure*?' asked Diana earnestly. 'Because even if there's only a trace you'd much better stay in bed.'

'No,' said Robin. 'I'm perfectly all right, honestly, Diana. Is it very late?'

'No,' said Diana; 'and I haven't had breakfast yet, so I'll wait for you.' So after she had gone Robin got up and had another hot bath and dressed and went down to Diana's room, where the breakfast was, and ate quite heartily, and only felt the bump on his head in twinges.

There was a letter for Diana from Mrs. Bannock, which she read to him. "*Your uncle's cousin is coming up to London next week, a very sweet person, and I've given her your address and asked her to call and see how you're getting on, because you never say anything in your letters about whether your vests need darning or——*" and here Diana skipped a few lines—"so mind you be nice to her. She

has a cottage very near Brighton, and would, I'm sure, ask you down for the summer holidays, which'll be much nicer than coming to dull old Nivenhurst and only seeing your uncle and myself"—Silly old pet!" said Diana affectionately. —"*and give my best wishes to the nice young man who seems to be looking after you so well, and by the way, have you seen Garstin yet? I keep telling the naughty boy to go and see you.*" But she doesn't say who the second cousin is.' She turned over the page. 'Oh yes—here on the back. "*I quite forgot to tell you—it's Ada Fitz-Gerald (your uncle's cousin). And mind you be nice.*"'

'Does she say when to expect her?' asked Robin.

"*Ada FitzGerald will write when she arrives in London.*" That's a second P.S. Oh, Robin, look at the time! We'll have to fly!

So Ada FitzGerald was banished to forgotten limbo for the time being, because they had to run for the bus, and even then missed it, and were late at the Studio.

§

When they came home that night there was a note on the green baize board for Diana. '*A Mr. Bangcock,*' it said, '*has 'phoned you four times to-day and will 'phone again this evening. Wd leave no mss.ge. K. Abernethy.*'

Their faces fell.

'Let us at once,' said Robin, dealing efficiently with the situation, 'go out to supper and then for a walk, and not get back till about half-past nine.'

They went, at once, out to supper and then for a walk, up to Hyde Park Corner and through the gates into the park, where Robin explained to Diana that all the shutters on one side of Wellington's house had been kept closed ever since Wellington ordered it when a lot of the Great British Public stoned his windows on account of the Corn Laws or something, which greatly impressed Diana, and then they walked slowly to Kensington Gardens and looked at the Albert Memorial (which Diana privately liked, on account of the statues at each

corner having kind faces) and then came out into High Street, Kensington, which even at its best is never desperately exciting and at night is definitely genteel, and walked the whole way down to Hammersmith Broadway and then turned round and came back, and caught a Forty-nine bus to the Chelsea Town Hall and went home by Sloane Square.

And when they got home Garstin was sitting in Diana's room waiting for them, having beguiled Miss Abernethy with honeyed words to let him in.

Now this was all very regrettable and disconcerting, and Diana and Robin were so taken aback for a minute that they couldn't do anything very much except just look at him, and Garstin seized the opportunity of making a humble, utterly abject, unconditional and moving apology, wherein he all but turned up his tail and begged to be kicked hard as many times as they liked and all in the same place.

It was entirely, said Garstin, due to his rashly having too much to drink, a thing he hardly ever did in the ordinary way, and he hadn't really known what harm he had done while inebriated until the receipt of an angry and contemptuous account of it from Everard when he had rung him up that morning, and had been so wasted with shame and mortification ever since that only a personal acceptance of his apology from Diana and Robin could ever give him any release from it.

All this Garstin said very affectingly and with great emotion, and looked so earnest about it that Diana and Robin began to have the uneasy feeling that they had wronged him foully in the heat of the moment, and the least they could do would be to accept his apology with a good grace and forget all about it (though of course it would have been nicer not to have seen him again at all).

The contrite Garstin, on being pardoned, threw in a bonus never to take them anywhere unpleasant again as long as he lived, and set about rebuilding his tumbled prestige. It took two hours and a quarter, and he left at a quarter to twelve with the satisfaction of an evening's

work well done, with promises of future visits, all sober.

Come over here a minute. . . . Garstin had fallen in love with Diana.

When they went down to see him out they found the last post had come in, and a letter had arrived for Diana from Ada FitzGerald. She was at the Tavistock Hotel in Bloomsbury, and would Diana have tea with her on Tuesday at four-thirty? Then they went back up to Diana's room and sat on the rug in front of the gas-fire, and Diana said very seriously: 'Robin, we must decide about Garstin.'

Robin shifted rather awkwardly and said yes, he supposed they must. Much as he hated Garstin, a relation of Diana's ought to be given preference over ordinary people, whatever his eccentricities, and Garstin at the moment was an acutely embarrassing topic of conversation.

'I don't think we ought to encourage him to come and see us,' said Diana thoughtfully, 'even though he *is* sorry about last night and won't do it again. There's something—horrid about Garstin, Robin—isn't there? Even if he hadn't bumped your head, which I couldn't forgive him for, ever.'

'I think,' said Robin, trying to be fair, 'that we'll always think of him with Everard's party as a background, but that might be our fault and not his. After all, I suppose you can't really hold things against some one if they were drunk when they did them. He looked after us quite well while he was sober.'

'But why did he *take* us there in the first place?' asked Diana, kneeling on the rug and looking at Robin earnestly. 'That's what was so unfair! He *knew* we wouldn't like it—he *must* have known we wouldn't like it!'

'Look,' suggested Robin mildly, 'let's not worry about Garstin any more. If you don't want to see a lot of him, we can always arrange it somehow, and after a bit he'll leave us alone altogether, and it's long past our bedtime.'

Diana relaxed and leaned forward and kissed him. 'You're very sweet, Robin,' she said; 'and I love you and love you and love you. Shall I come and tuck you in again to-night?'

'Yes, please,' said Robin, and was just going to kiss Diana when Number Seven fell down the stairs outside and made such a scene about it that the atmosphere was ruined, and they rushed out to look.

Later, when Diana came to tuck him in, he suddenly wished the bump hurt more than it did, as he felt he was taking the tucking-in under false pretences, not really being poorly any more. Diana sat on the edge of the bed again for a minute, and stroked his forehead, and then he took her hand and held it against his cheek. 'I wish,' he said, and he was beginning to sound drowsy, 'that there was just one new way of telling a person you loved them—a way that no one had ever thought of before, and which really showed how much they *did* love them. Then I'd tell you I loved you like that. And as soon as I'd told you, I'd want the words to split up and disappear so that no one could ever use them to any one else again.'

And now that Number Seven was safely in bed he kissed Diana and held her close to him for a little while, and then Diana rubbed her nose against his affectionately, and went back to Number Eleven, and they both fell asleep thinking about each other and glowing with contentment; which, if you're really in love, you do.

Tuesday arrived uneventfully, the bump on Robin's head was almost gone, though there was still a scar on his ear, and the party had faded discreetly to an unimportant place in memory.

In the afternoon they separated at Piccadilly, Diana to tea with Ada FitzGerald, and Robin to a sevenpenny seat in the Cameo Newsreel Theatre, in Charing Cross Road, where he would stay till half-past five and then call for Diana at the Tavistock Hotel. Then they were going to have something light at a Lyons and queue in the gallery for *Reunion in Vienna* at the Lyric Theatre, in Shaftesbury Avenue.

All was well with the world.

Robin strolled along to the Cameo at his leisure, taking in the life swirling about him with a kindly eye.

At the corner of Charing Cross Road he ran into Everard Carter.

'But, my *dear*!' cried Everard shrilly, so that four or five passers-by and a sandwich-man turned round to look, 'how *absolutely* marvellous running into you like this! But you're *exactly* the person I wanted to meet!—but *exactly*! I haven't had a *moment's* rest since that horrible, horrible night! I've been so *miserable*! Let's quickly, quickly go and have a drink somewhere—but you *must*, Robin—I'm *quite* determined, after the awful way you were treated at my party!' And because the passers-by and the sandwich-man were still looking at them, Robin allowed himself to be thrust into a taxi by Everard and driven away to the 'Stagnant Cheese,' in Mayfair.

Now, the thing about the 'Stagnant Cheese' is that if you go upstairs, it's all perfectly respectable, but downstairs is the haunt of young men of both sexes whispering little things to each other, and downstairs Everard took Robin and ordered beer, and Robin was utterly wretched. As usual, Everard did all the talking, and as usual it was about nothing, and was held up every now and then while Everard greeted a friend; and after half an hour, when Robin was beginning to think he would never see anything normal again, somebody came in with a girl, and Everard nearly choked with excitement and leaped to his feet like a gazelle.

'*Douglas*!' he cried, waving his arms frantically. 'Douglas! But it *can*' be! But it *is*! But how *marvellous*—my dear, a *miracle*! Douglas, Douglas, Douglas, come here at once, at once!' And he beat feverishly on the table with his beer-jug.

'All right, all right,' said Douglas Middleton like one pacifying an ailing child. 'You don't have to do all that, you fathead! Penny, this is Flossie Carter. They don't go any lower. Flossie, pull yourself together

and be presented. This is Agatha Penn, and for God's sake behave yourself!

'How do you do!' said Everard breathlessly; 'and this is Robin Gardner—but, Douglas, you've *changed*! You're better-looking! What *have* they done to you in naughty little America?'

'We've made him vurry conceited,' said Miss Penn.

'Oh, but isn't it splendid?' Everard demanded rapturously. 'Of *course* you have! Isn't he *divine*? What'll you have to drink, it's *absolutely* on me; I won't hear a *word* against it. *When* did you get back, *why* didn't you let me know, *what* are you going to do now, *how* much money have you made, *why* didn't you ever write, you awful creature, and quickly quickly order because here comes the person and you've *got* to have something!'

Douglas shook his head sadly. 'Raving,' he explained to Miss Penn, 'raving. It's rather distressing, isn't it? What do we drink?'

'Gin and vurmooth for this one,' said Miss Penn, 'doubled.'

'Two of them,' said Douglas to the person.

'And now *tell* me everything!' Everard ordered impatiently. '*Everything*! I'm dying of curiosity! But actually *dying*!'

'God's *Stepchildren* closed last Tuesday,' said Douglas, 'and we sailed Wednesday and arrived in London at half-past twelve this morning. I saw Gilbert Miller about a fortnight ago, and he said there might be something for me after *Christopher Bean* comes off. When'll that be?'

'Not for *years*,' said Everard; 'it's simply running and *running*, but you'll get something long before! I just *can't* get over seeing you walk in like this! We must have an *enormous* party to celebrate, Douglas!—an *enormous* one—'

'No,' said Douglas quickly, 'thank you very much, but not one of your parties, Flossie. I'm all unworthy. I'm sorry I've got such Godawful friends,' he added to Miss Penn, 'and you weren't even warned, poor darling.'

'That's O.K.,' said Miss Penn airily; 'it's all part of the sights.'

Robin, completely overlooked in the riptide of Everard's welcome, was able to study the Middleton unobserved, and tried to remember where he had heard his name before. He was deeply impressed by his ease and charm, which seemed very splendid things, and he was certainly amazingly good-looking and honest and open and dignified and all that a successful actor should be; and while he told Everard about *God's Stepchildren* and life in New York, which he did very wittily (though not with Everard's sort of wit, which meant that Everard only laughed out of dutiful admiration for the Middleton and not because he thought his jokes were funny), Robin found himself becoming more and more impressed and even more admiring than Everard, but felt it was quite in order, as the Middleton was unmistakably a worthy subject for adulation, and very definitely the sort of man a young actor ought to take as a model; and Middleton talked so charmingly and engrossed him so much that the next time he glanced at the clock it was twenty past five and he was horror-struck.

He seized his hat and jumped up and rattled a hasty apology to Everard, explaining that he was late for an appointment, and would have to go immediately, and was just going to say 'Good-bye' to the Middleton and Miss Penn when Douglas (who had looked at his watch during Robin's excuse) stood up and said that he and Miss Penn were late as well, and could he drop Robin anywhere in their taxi, to which Robin replied that he wouldn't dream of taking them out of their way, but thanked him all the same, and was then assured that he wouldn't be taking them out of their way at all; and Everard's offer to come along as well having been gallantly but firmly squashed, Douglas called a taxi, and they climbed in and left for the Tavistock Hotel, leaving Everard gazing wistfully after them from the pavement.

The taxi made a bee-line for Piccadilly, where the

traffic jams can always be relied upon to put a meter up another shilling, and Robin sat in a corner with his back to the driver and felt exceedingly shy and tongue-tied.

'By the way,' said Agatha Penn, 'what's the pressing engagement we're tearing away to keep? Furst I hurd of it.'

'Penny, my love-light,' said the Middleton, 'remember this. When confronted with Everard Carter, always keep by you a pressing engagement elsewhere in case of emergency.'

'Is *your* pressing engagement a figment arve the imagination as well?' inquired Agatha Penn of Robin.

'Oh no,' said Robin, 'I really do have to be at the Tavistock Hotel by half-past five.'

'Is Flossie a particular friend of yours?' asked the Middleton.

'Good Lord, no!' said Robin with great force, and then felt ashamed of himself and looked out of the window.

'The Middleton laughed delightedly and leaned back. 'So Flossie's still setting snares outside his game reserve!' he said. 'Have you ever been to his flat?'

'Once,' said Robin unwillingly, 'to a party.'

'That must have been pretty ghastly, wasn't it?'

'It was rather,' said Robin.

How terrible—the Middleton thought he was one of those! He wished the taxi would get to Tavistock Hotel and not fool in traffic jams, because he was blushing.

'Gee, you folks sure have it in deep for the Carter guy,' Agatha Penn remarked. 'Are there a lart like him around these parrts?'

'Theowsands and theowsands,' the Middleton assured her. 'But you get used to it in time.' The taxi slowed down. 'It looks as if this is where we part company,' he said to Robin, with a flashing smile. 'I hope we'll meet again some time.'

Robin echoed the hope politely and pulled the handle of the door down. 'It's very kind of you to have

given me a lift,' he said, 'and thank you very much indeed. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' nodded the Middleton pleasantly.

'Bye,' said Agatha Penn, and he shut the door, and Middleton gave an address to the driver, and the cab sauntered away. Robin stood looking after it for a moment, and then turned and went into the hotel.

Thus his first meeting with Douglas Middleton.

Often, after the production of *Soft Laughter*, it struck Robin as an absurdly inappropriate overture to the thundering of heavy brasses that was to follow. There had been nothing to suggest that two potential arch-enemies had met for the first time; no omens, never an indication of what was in the wind, not even a vague premonition that they would ever meet again. At the time it all seemed so trivial and unimportant that he didn't even bother to tell Diana about it when he found her waiting in the lounge for him and wondering why he was late. Actually, he would have been hard put to it to tell Diana anything just then, because she burst out excitedly as soon as she saw him with the news that Ada FitzGerald was taking them to dinner at the Savoy and then to Elisabeth Bergner in *Escape Me Never* at the Apollo that night, in the stalls, and they didn't have to dress, and then rushed him into the sitting-room to meet Miss FitzGerald.

She was thin and quiet and middle-aged and friendly, with alert, humorous eyes, and dark hair brushed severely back, and wore tweeds. The tea at four-thirty had proved a mild and soothing affair for Diana, with an easy flow of conversation, for Ada FitzGerald had the extremely worthy quality of being able to make people talk unself-consciously, and there was very little she did not understand when Robin was presented to her.

Because she was so agreeably impressed by Diana and Robin (not only by their appearance, but by their terrific appreciation of the dinner at the Savoy and the stalls at *Escape Me Never*, and their semi-incoherent thanks when they said good night) Ada FitzGerald wrote them a note when she arrived back home, wherein they were both

invited for the summer holidays for as long as they wanted to stay.

The next Sunday they went down to Balham and asked if it was all in order with Mr. and Mrs. Gardner if they spent a holiday together. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner with no hesitation at all assured them that it was all perfectly in order, and would be an excellent change for Robin provided Diana watched him and saw that he didn't go rushing about in the sun without a hat (which he had done at Blackpool in nineteen-nineteen and spent four days in bed as a result) and Diana promised she would, and when they arrived back in Ebury Street that night Miss Abernethy met them on the stairs.

'That Mr. Bannock called round,' she said, 'so I toold him I didn't expect ye in till leyte, and he'd do well note to wait.'

'Thank you very much indeed, Miss Abernethy,' said Diana warmly; 'it was most kind of you.'

'There was anther young man with him,' added Miss Abernethy, who had obviously been struck by him, 'rather gude-looking. Oh, and will you mind note using the bath until I can get a plumber in fust thing to-morrow? Number Five's face-flannel got stuffed doon the waste-pipe and we can none of us get it oot.'

'Very well, Miss Abernethy,' said Diana. 'Good night.'

'Gude night,' returned Miss Abernethy cordially, and vanished through into the basement to pick a fight with the maid.

'I wonder who the other young man was?' said Diana as they climbed the stairs. 'It couldn't have been any one we met that night if he's rather good-looking.'

'I don't know,' said Robin sleepily; 'but I'm glad we were out.'

And so to bed.

CHAPTER VII

'Will you walk a little faster?'

LOOK; I have done a fearful thing. With the re-appearance of the Middleton, the first phase of this book is done. This gives me no glow of achievement, as the damn thing was supposed to run to two hundred pages, and hasn't. Go back and pad I will not. I shall not even employ a ghost writer to pepper it with anecdotes about famous actors (which has been done often enough before now and been a riot as often as it has shot the book on to the railway bookstalls at a shilling).

I am telling you a perfectly straightforward story in my own quiet way; I shall go on telling it to you; and if you don't like it, have it out with Messrs. Methuen.

Perhaps you wonder why Ada FitzGerald was given such prominence when the Middleton, who is our arch-villain, was back in circulation and had a prior claim? It is very simple. Without Ada FitzGerald this book would end here. Thus, before I can take the Middleton in hand, Ada FitzGerald must be explained.

Midway between Petworth and Brighton, which is about five miles from the sea and on a river, Ada FitzGerald lived in a seventeenth-century farm-house and wrote short stories for the working girl. When they were published in the sevenpenny magazines they were under her own name, but when she made an extra twelve guineas from the twopenny papers with a two-colour cover, they were credited to Victoria Morndew and luridly illustrated with pen-and-ink pictures of virtuous ladies in their shifts being interfered with in a threatening manner by men who were all sneer and thin moustache.

It gave Ada FitzGerald an enormous kick to write these stories, and an even more enormous one to get the twelve guineas because they took her from eleven

in the morning till lunch to write and kept her in fits of happy laughter.

Diana and Robin arrived late one evening, having been collected at Brighton by Ada FitzGerald and brought out in a car. By supper they had taken her to their bosoms, and she could do no wrong.

Once you have disarmed the reserve of a shy young man, he will talk louder and faster and more indiscreetly than any other type known to God or man. As I said before, Ada could do this, and did, and was almost immediately inundated with Diana's and Robin's problems about getting enough money to be married and have a flat with window-boxes; and instead of applying gentle restraint to their enthusiasm, as behoves an elder dealing with first loves, she drew herself whole-heartedly into the project and became as tense about it as they were.

The utter futility of seeking a job as an actor was made clear to her. The horror of a year and a half's dreary wait until the course ended was brought home in all its stark reality. She was too wise to point out how right Fate had been to arrange a year and a half's wait, and that probably at the end of it they would both think differently.

'Why don't you try writing a play?' she asked at last. 'From what I know, none of the managers can read one, so you ought to have as much chance as the next person.'

There was a long and thoughtful pause, and then Robin said carefully: 'I don't think I could.'

'There's no harm in trying,' Ada returned. 'There's everything here in the way of paper and pens and dictionaries.'

Diana's eyes shone. 'Oh yes!' she said breathlessly. 'Oh yes! Robin, you could!'

Robin looked at her unconvinced, but greatly excited inside. 'What would I be able to write a play about?' he countered. 'I don't know enough about it.'

'Who does?' said Ada. 'Look at the muck that gets on. People don't go to plays any more—they go

to see stars. All you have to do is to write a vehicle for a star.'

Diana joined in enthusiastically. 'Of *course* you can write a play, Robin. Just remember all the ones we've read and everything we've learned at the Studio. It's not as if you didn't know anything about the technical side, like ordinary people wouldn't!'

'And remember, it's very hard to get the public to come to a good play or a bad play, but they'll pack out a mediocre one,' said Ada, and quoted four that were running at the moment, though I can't because it would offend the people who wrote them (and very rightly). and Diana and Robin agreed that they were ridiculously poor plays and yet were running because of the stars.

Now, this is a very deceptive argument, and has given many a potential playwright heartburn before now, because he cannot understand why the play he has written under cover of the ledger while the Chief Clerk wasn't looking and got the Boss's secretary to type for a box of chocolates and a seat at the Plaza is refused all round London, while appalling trash is going on, right and left, and making fortunes for the thugs who turned it out. True, there are a great many London managers to whom a play in manuscript is no more intelligible than an Urdu chant for four voices and a male choir (and to whom all Urdu is Urdu); but there is also a Providence in the theatre, watching over it, so that however many good plays go on by mistake and bad plays by deliberate intent, the thing is evened out in the long run and given some sort of chaotic balance. Without this Providence the real playwright would be swallowed up in a sea of little beings who had either written the first play to pick up where Shakespeare left off, or a play about something that once happened to them personally and was quite amazing, or whose whole life summed up would make a wonderful play except that no one would believe it, or who had a friend who had written a play and was too shy to peddle it himself, but was prepared to pay a handsome commission to whoever sold it.

And this Providence brushed Robin Gardner with its mantle, and because he had a sense of the theatre, and because he read plays intelligently, and had imagination, *Soft Laughter* materialized out of nothing, and was as far advanced as the third page of Act I by lunch the next day.

They worked on it together, in the garden, on cushions. Every word was subject to searching criticism before it was put down. The plot was about a struggling young pianist who became famous, had a misunderstanding with the woman he loved, nearly married a Bit, and then rushed back to the woman he loved, though only just in time for the last-act curtain.

It is as good a plot as any, and certainly people never seem to get tired of seeing it.

And while they are battling with a stubborn Muse on Ada FitzGerald's front lawn, I must divert your attention to the Middleton for a while. I must also warn you that at any moment now these pages may be rent asunder by the effulgent dynamics of Charlotte ('Lottie') Osgood, of New Dover, Wis., and once here, she is here to stay.

I shall prepare you against this, and when I whistle, duck.

When Douglas Riley Middleton left the house of Bannock under a cloud at sixteen, Nature had more or less completed her handiwork on him. He had, in spirit, the length, breadth and depth of a playing-card (something in Spades with a warped pip) and about the same ability to feel pity, give affection or see himself for what he was. His three assets, callousness, sadism, and tireless desire, he hid discreetly behind his dazzling veneer of irresistible charm.

At eighteen he went up to Cambridge, and at eighteen and a quarter hurried back one Saturday evening and demanded five hundred pounds in a cash cheque with some urgency. Mr. Middleton refused it stolidly in the face of all blandishment. Irritated and impatient, Douglas at last explained that it was for an illegal operation, and that the illegal operation was for a minor.

Perspiring slightly, though the night was chilly, Mr. Middleton wrote the cheque. At the same desk and only a few moments later, under pressure, Douglas wrote to his tutor and subsequently came down from Cambridge unhonoured and unsung.

The incident had done one important thing. It had taught the Middleton wariness and subtlety. He ceased to swagger abroad with his heart on his sleeve, he bottled down his arrogance, and began using discrimination. He adopted gallantry as a practical asset. He overhauled his manners and polished them diligently. He picked up the Eton *patois* that goes for wit in Mayfair, improved upon it, gave it the stamp of his individuality, and reissued it. He became a social lion, the life of every party, was held up as the model English gentleman by English gentlemen, and came in for such demand that his time was no longer his own. For a year he went systematically through London society conquering all before him, and then grew bored, and quit it for the theatre.

Now Mr. Middleton, Senior, when he backed plays to advance young ladies in their careers, had always taken care that the young ladies could act passably well, and had something passably sound to act in, and in the long run made more money out of it than he did at Ascot and Newmarket. Douglas, following after, attached little importance to box-office returns. He wanted to act himself, and intended to.

Way up where Shaftesbury Avenue tipples into Holborn's outskirts and becomes a dingy street *sans* names in lights and theatre fronts, is a thin and plaintive building (over a bulb shop and a rude chemist) called Hearnkangel Chambers, and on the third floor, which is three rooms and a glassed-in pot-hole for the typist, are the London offices of Meadowsweet and Angussøn Ltd., who control Meadson Productions, Meadson Tours Ltd., Meadson Musicals, and the Meadson Theatrical Agency, with all of which we shall have truck.

Philip Meadowsweet had changed his name in 1913 from Stenkovitch, and buried his Russian accent beneath a shoal of conscientious aitches and a fetid cigar.

The aitches were seldom in the right places, but the cigar never wavered from the left-hand corner of Mr. Meadowsweet's bull-like jaw. He was fat, had eyes like flies on a doughnut, and left the talking to Mr. Angusson, who had been simple Cohen before a bankruptcy in 1911 sent him scuttling to the Scotch for shelter. Mr. Angusson (James Ralph) was tall and benign in appearance. He looked as if he had once been something dignified in Whitehall, which is how he intended to look, but his scruples were wizened with disuse, and his mind was a small piece of cheese. Mr. Meadowsweet had his money in Government bonds, Mr. Angusson in quota film companies, and they both evaded super-tax. The highest salary paid in their office, Miss Mitchell the secretary's, was three pounds a week. Any actor taking part in a Meadson Production, Tour or Musical, paid 10 per cent. of his salary to the Meadson Theatrical Agency for getting him the job in the first place.

In 1914 they had been a small company dealing in second-hand theatrical properties in a warehouse near Aldgate. Then the War opened up new and dazzling possibilities, and by the end of it Meadowsweet and Angusson had benefited in overflowing measure. When the actor-managers, producers, actors, and playwrights wandered back into their profession, wondering vaguely how to pick up again after four years out of it, they found Meadowsweet and Angusson firmly ensconced in Shaftesbury Avenue with the leases of half a dozen theatres in their safe and a perfect willingness to discuss contracts on their own terms, which were comfortably on the right side of Meadowsweet and Angusson's bank balance and the law, but set a new high level in sweating.

In the post-War chaos they did even better than in the War years proper, and with the gradual collapse of the actor-manager and the professional playwright, their last two thorns were removed and they became despots. For ten years they waxed powerful, and then slid a little towards uncertainty with the Depression

(though, as they only took money out of the theatre but never put any back, their private fortunes stood firm), for which the Depression came a slump in Backers, and with the slump in Backers came inertia for the firm of Meadowsweet and Angusson.

They cut down expenses, halved salaries, and put up their share of their authors' film rights from 50 per cent. to 75, and so kept afloat.

The Depression passed and left them on Mount Ararat.

Backers appeared again; timidly and in small droves, but Backers. The firm launched out into production again on the old scale (save that salaries were left at half for the time being) and carried on for a year much as if there had never been a hiatus. Then strange things began to happen.

The Provinces began curling their lips with scorn at Meadson Tours. Two of their West-End productions were kicked neatly in the belly by the critics, and came off with a combined loss of seven thousand pounds, and their authors discovered that other managers gave better terms and took less of their film rights.

Meadowsweet and Angusson found themselves dependent on first plays and second-rate artists. Seriously perturbed, they rounded up their Backers, called the roll, found seven-eighths of them A.W.O.L., and the remaining eighth with a hundred delicate but positive reasons why they could no longer risk capital on theatrical ventures.

Meadowsweet and Angusson found themselves without a friend.

And in their hour of need Baal sent them Douglas Middleton. When they first set eyes on him they saw only a tender and fatted calf, ready for the killing. His lovely looks, apparent honesty, and obvious youth were soothing drugs to the battered souls of Meadowsweet and Angusson. But the contract they signed to produce him in a play was the first one of its kind in their office, and Meadowsweet openly cried when he discovered that clause fifteen, which both of them had passed over

as a triviality, had neutralized all the rest of the clauses in the contract, and they were virtually the Middleton's salaried assistants for the run of his play. This clause was subsequently incorporated in all Meadson contracts with enormous success.

The following October *God's Stepchildren* went into rehearsal with three thousand of Mr. Middleton's capital behind it, ran a preliminary week in Manchester, and then opened in London with Douglas Middleton in the lead, on a foggy Monday night, with a Cochran revue at the Adelphi as opposition, and no Names in the case. Without a tatter of technique or experience Douglas made a success through sheer braggadocio and force of personality, and the play ran till June of the next year.

It came off, still playing to capacity, because Douglas was weary of it, and an offer had come from New York offering much fine gold for his presence in it there. All the cajoling and moving eloquence of Meadowsweet and Angusson, concerned, could not change his nay to aye, and he sailed on the *Majestic*.

The voyage teemed with incident, due mainly to a Michael Angelo page-boy who did anything for ten dollars and made seventy out of the trip; and when the Middleton arrived in New York he found the executives there fully prepared to do him honours as a star in his own right. He was given, for his leading lady, Agatha Penn. At the first reading she felt violently in love with the Middleton, but intelligently kept it to herself, and as the rehearsals evolved into a duel between them for the up-stage positions she had more than enough to pre-occupy her mind and keep it from flitting to lighter fancies. Later they reached an amicable compromise by halving the up-stage positions, and glowing with goodwill and self-sacrifice, Agatha Penn caught him as he was leaving for his hotel after the rehearsal and said: 'Say, Mister Middleton, I know you're tired and I am too, so what; but why not let's you and me go over that high spot in Act Two this evening, provided of course you've nothing on your books?'

Douglas, catching the gist of the thing at once, said what a good idea it was, and that he was quite free.

'That's swell then,' said Miss Penn. 'We'll eat some place, and then go on to my apartment for the peace and quiet.'

They ate in the Rainbow Grill, and Miss Penn pumped him for particulars of his life and habits. Over the sweet she remembered the last English actor that had come back to her flat to go over the high spot in Act Two. 'Say,' she said frankly, 'you won't think me personal, but you ain't a nance by any chance?'

'And what,' said Douglas serenely, 'is a nance?'

'O.K.,' said Miss Penn, satisfied. 'Let it pass.'

In the peace and quiet of her apartment Miss Penn became a live and vital woman. Like many before her she had taken Douglas to be young and innocent, and displaying an even greater innocence herself, went to great pains to create the proper atmosphere. She left the Middleton in the sitting-room smoking a cigarette (and wondering how much longer she was going to fool about) while she changed into a seductive little thing from her last play. She calculated that the Middleton would take a certain amount of persuasion and encouragement, and would no doubt have to be helped a little, like most young and innocent Englishmen over in New York on business. She lingered over her adornment, humming happily to herself, and was deciding to feed him dry Martinis and then follow it quickly with gin to scare off his self-consciousness, when the door opened and Douglas came in, as pink and pretty as the day his mother achieved him.

'Ready when you are,' he said courteously, and threw Miss Penn upon the bed.

In the morning he attended rehearsal alone.

Miss Penn was too stiff and exhausted, and was still suffering from shock. Later in the day she rose and had her maid rub her down with alcohol.

'Gee,' she said ruminatively as the maid warmed to her task; 'gee, I could love that guy.'

A fortnight later *God's Stepchildren* opened, and proved

everybody whose opinions went for anything wrong by being a success.

'*Agatha Penn*,' said one reviewer, '*improves apace. In place of her usual lusty exuberance, which comes so harsh on the nerves after the first act, she gives us a new languorous placidity, a simplicity of delivery which is doubly effective in itself. The scene in Act III, when she returns home tired out, is a masterpiece of subdued realism. The show is swell too. The Middleton boy packs a mean half-Nelson in the big rape scene. Take the kiddies. He sure has what the Greeks could take. Susceptible ladies will quit the theatre, shaken to the fanny, or I'll stand for President in Cuba and make it.*'

Which is praise.

And then, with a low, zooming noise like bison on a prairie, Lottie Osgood heralded her approach.

'Your presence is requested,' said a small card, 'at a reception in your honour,' and went on to tell him where.

'Who the hell is Mrs. Charlotte Osgood?' asked Douglas of his dresser.

The dresser ceased his folding of little odds and ends and paused deliberately.

'A scorbatic demirep wid six million dollars a year, Her old man's a drunken bum, and dey got de second biggest joint on Long Island,' he made answer. 'For why?'

'Party in my honour next Tuesday,' said Douglas.

'Look,' said the dresser kindly. 'Lay off dat dame like you would a skunk, unless you gotta yen for skunks, in which case just lay off dat dame.'

Douglas applied a delicately arched eyebrow to his make-up, and leant back and studied the effect contentedly for a few moments.

'How is it the lady's so well known to you, Wallis?' he asked after a pause.

'I aln't been a dresser on Broadway for two years without keeping my peepers open,' said Wallis simply.

'Even de gangsters lay off of her, and when a gangster lays off a dame wid six million bucks, it ain't dat dere's anything wrong wid de gangster except dat he got taste.'

'Then I ought to refuse the invitation?' inquired Douglas, applying the second eyebrow.

'Even yer best friend'd tell ya,' said Wallis. 'There was a knock on the door. 'Dat'll be Miss Penn,' he added.

'It'll be Miss Penn,' agreed Douglas resignedly. 'Let her in.'

'O.K.,' said Wallis, and did.

Love, when it came to Miss Penn, came in a big way. When she gave, she gave her all, stinting nothing, and the Middleton found it wearing, though not so wearing as Miss Penn found it. She had lost twenty-four pounds in three weeks, which reducing had never been able to do for her, was always very very tired, and though her maid now referred to Mr. Middleton as the Fourteen Rollicking Sailors, Miss Penn would not have had it otherwise.

'Hullo, honey!' she said endearingly. 'Just came in to hear the noos.'

'I saw you at lunch,' he reminded her, 'and there's been no water under the bridge since then—except that.' He pushed the invitation over to her.

Miss Penn picked it up and read it, and then a strange expression stole over her face.

'Say, Doug!' she said urgently. 'You ain't going, though?'

He looked up at her in faint surprise.

'Wallis has just said better not,' he admitted; 'but I hadn't decided.'

Miss Penn caught him by the arm and shook him fiercely. 'My stars, Douglas Middleton,' she said with a flashing eye, 'if you go near that old she-goat don't come near me again! I'm particular what I catch! Prarmise me you'll lay off her, Doug! Gee, honey, prarmise!'

'Is she as bad as all that?' asked the Middleton, with stirring interest, scenting a kindred spirit.

'Bad?' echoed Miss Penn. 'Sav, Doug, you're noo here, and you ain't got Lottie Osgoods ovur in Lunnon, so take a tip from a pal, will you? Roll on fly-paper or go to bed with a moose, but don't play ball with Lottie Osgood!'

The Middleton powdered his face carefully, dusted it with a puff and then took the invitation from Miss Penn's excited fingers and dropped it neatly into the waste-paper basket with a small flourish.

'Atta boy!' said Miss Penn with great relief.

When he came down to the dressing-room at the second interval there was a cable from London waiting for him. It was from Mr. Middleton, and was to the effect, that the Middleton fortune had been bitten in quarters by the failure of an oil well in Poland, and only one quarter remained. The house was being sold and Mr. Middleton was retiring to the Isle of Wight. Douglas did a hasty sum on the back of the envelope, made his father's new income two thousand a year, and played the last act in a violent temper.

At the end he took his curtains sick and angry, and when he got back to the dressing-room sent a message to Agatha Penn by Wallis that he wouldn't be dining that night as arranged. Then he set about familiarizing himself with the fact that he no longer drew an allowance and that the theatre had changed from an amusing toy to a grimly serious means of livelihood. He felt the first emotion of a professional steal over him—the fear that his job would be the last, that when it came off he would exist on rapidly dwindling capital until starvation caught up with him (for two thousand a year was poverty to the Middleton at the moment)—and he was suddenly frightened by the new-found insecurity.

His restless eye caught the invitation in the waste-paper basket.

Six nullion dollars a year and a drunken burn husband.

Calmly and quietly Douglas Middleton marked down Lottie Osgood as the first kill.

CHAPTER VIII

'Flourish of Hautboys. Enter Porpoise.'

THE Third Act was finished.

Two and a half weeks to the day Robin wrote *Curtain* in a hand that shook with excitement, looked at Diana without speaking, and then put all the acts together and laid the completed manuscript in the middle of the rug.

'Well, there it is,' he said after a pause, with a poor attempt to sound off-hand. '*Soft Laughter*, by Robin Gardner.' He swallowed with difficulty (owing to fierce pride) and said it again, this time including 'a play in three acts.'

Then suddenly he leapt to his feet, gave a loud resounding yell of joy, and did five somersaults across the lawn. 'It's finished! It's finished! Yaroo! Yaray! Kaloo! Kalay!' and did five more somersaults back to the rug and then lay kicking his heels in the air and singing.

Ada FitzGerald, on the verge of saving an honest mill-girl from worse than death in an hotel bedroom, put down her pen and went over to the window. 'Come in and read it to me, you noisy little brat!' she called. The noisy little brat rolled over on to his stomach, catapulted himself on to his feet, seized Diana's hand and the priceless script, and tore madly across the lawn. They were in bathing costumes, because the day was the hottest so far, and had been sunburnt from working on the play in the garden and swimming in the river, and were looking fitter than the Bannocks or Gardners would have thought possible; and Ada FitzGerald, taking most of the credit for it, felt pleased and exceedingly proud of them.

In the study *Soft Laughter* had its first reading. Robin sat on the sofa with Diana curled up beside him and the manuscript on his knees, and read right through it without a break.

Ada FitzGerald behaved superbly. She laughed at the jokes, and remained hushed when things became poignant, and murmured approvingly at passages that showed outstanding quality of writing or sentiment, and grew more and more surprised as the play went on that something she had suggested half for her own amusement, and certainly for theirs, had developed unexpectedly into a perfectly coherent piece of theatrical writing. A lot of it showed his inexperience, most of it showed his youth, but its technique was unmistakably sound, its situations were built up and sustained, and the characters were credible. He had kept his story simple and his dialogue to the point. He had done the incredible. He had written a commercial property.

All this Ada FitzGerald told him, extravagantly, for she had a fairly sound idea of the discouragements in front, and promised to send it into Brighton to be typed, with two carbon copies, as soon as the maid had to go in for the house.

Diana and Robin went back into the garden and down to the river to digest her verdict. With Ada FitzGerald's seal of approval came the sudden soothing conviction that only formalities stood between *Soft Laughter* and a two-years run; that at the first signs of its success they would be able to get married, and that all their fears and worries were as good as done for. They sat with their arms round each other, too happy to speak, and watched the willow branches trailing in the water and catching stray twigs.

It was all going to be all right.

Ada FitzGerald had Liked the Play. If Ada FitzGerald Liked the Play, somewhere in London was a manager who would Like the Play too, and would sign Robin up and consult him about the actors.

Diana drew a glorious picture of Ivor Novello, John Gielgud and Noel Coward all quarrelling furiously as to who should play the lead, and calling urgently on Robin to arbitrate, addressing him very respectfully as Mr. Gardner, and not sitting down until he had, and standing up whenever he did, and being exceedingly civil and

polite to him, while the telephone rang incessantly from representatives of all the big film companies outbidding each other, having heard about the play and wanting quite desperately to make a film of it.

Robin himself could only see it in terms of furniture for their flat and a radio-gramophone that went one better than Flossie Carter's, and (after the first year) a small car, and a genuine valet to lay his clothes out and turn undesirables away from the door or telephone by explaining coldly that Mr. Gardner was out at present, but that it was possible to give him any message within reason. He was not desperately in need of its running two years, though; because six months would be long enough to collect the money necessary to marry Diana on; and provided he married Diana and stayed married, the other things were incidentals and not vital.

They were vaguely conscious of a motor-cycle making filthy noises in the direction of the house. Diana half-lifted her head from his shoulder, but felt it couldn't be anything really important and settled back again, half-closing her eyes. The sun had gone behind the willows and the air was cooler, and Robin's arms round her made everything terribly safe and peaceful, and she felt very appreciative about being alive. Two field-mice came out on the opposite bank and ran round in small circles for the love of the thing, and then stopped suddenly and went back home again for no apparent reason, looking a little foolish. A trout, as like as not, plopped a circle of ripples into motion in the middle of the river, and a cow in the next field but one said something vague to a friend but received no answer. Two thrushes arrived in a willow tree at the same time and lashed themselves into a fury over the squatter's rights, and then Ada FitzGerald's voice hailed them from the house, their soaring dream came whistling down to earth, and they scrambled to their feet and made their way back.

She was on the terrace shading her eyes against the setting sun when they crossed the lawn again. 'Oh, there you are!' she said, as if she had called Fortnum and Mason and was surprised to see Diana and Robin

instead. 'There's a friend of yours just arrived. He's in the study having tea.' They noticed the dusty motor-cycle leaning against the front of the house and quickened their pace inquisitively.

'Who, Ada?' asked Diana, as they reached the terrace. 'Somebody we like?'

'Go in and see for yourselves,' Ada FitzGerald returned, and by her face they knew it was some one they didn't.

They went up the steps and into the study warily, and of course it was Garstin Bannock.

'Hullo, Di! Wotcheer, Cock Robin!' he said with his mouth full. 'I bet you didn't expect to see me here!' He swallowed and took in their attire with a penetrating eye. 'Why, now,' he said pleasantly, 'been bathing! The mater didn't tell me Ada threw in bathing! Still, I can always fall back on an old tobacco bag and a pair of water-wings.'

'How did you get away from the office?' asked Diana, trying to hide her regret that he had.

'Flossie wangled it. Got his old man to switch my fortnight from February. I'm the Second Dramatic Critic now,' he added as explanation, 'so I'm entitled to the odd privilege.'

'Does that mean you're here a fortnight?' demanded Ada FitzGerald with sudden misgivings.

'Ah no, Ada! Just the week-end. Then I'm going on to Land's End on the pestiferous stinkadore outside, which, I may add, has been hired by the week for the purpose and plays hell with me. Twice, while coming down after a bump, I have all but sat on my organs. By the way I called round on you two just before you left London, but you were out. A Sunday night it was. Rather a pity. I had Doug Middleton with me, and I wanted you to meet him.'

'We'd been down to Robin's people for the day,' said Diana. 'I hope you didn't wait or anything.'

'No,' said Garstin; 'but I want you to meet the Middleton again. You got on pretty well the last time, if I remember rightly, and he's influential — knows

people in the theatre and they listen to him. If he takes a liking to you he can make things easy in a lot of quarters. Only just back from America. Got a sort of constant nymph called Aggie Penn in tow. Nice girl in a way, but a bit intense. I know you two feel pretty chary of meeting people on my recommendation,' he went on disarmingly, 'and Gawd knows you've more than enough cause, but this time I'm on the level. The Middleton's civilized, and he's too interested in the Penn to be dangerous to any one.'

'Why, I remember now!' said Robin. 'I've met him.'

'Oh?' said Garstin, raising an eyebrow. 'He didn't tell me about it.'

'No—he wouldn't remember me,' Robin returned, and gave the details briefly; 'but he struck me as a very decent sort of person—I mean, giving me a lift like that when he really needn't have, just to help me get away.'

'There you are, you see?' Garstin appealed to Diana. 'I said he was on the level, and I've spent a lot of time getting him interested in you.'

'Why?' asked Diana simply.

Disconcerted for a moment, Garstin fixed reproving eyes on her.

'Why do you mean—why?' he parried defensively.

'Why the sudden solicitude for them?' Ada supplied.

Garstin selected a look of hurt surprise, and showed it once round the company. 'I'm just trying,' he said with quiet pathos, 'to make up for the trouble I gave you at Carter's.'

'You don't need to, though, Garstin,' Diana assured him promptly, 'because we agreed to forget all about it.'

'Does that mean you don't want to meet the Middleton?'

'Why, no,' said Diana, taken aback. 'I only meant that you weren't to feel you were under any obligation to make up for anything.'

'It's not a question of obligation,' said Garstin, leaning forward for one of Ada's cigarettes, 'it's that I genuinely want to help.' His eye suddenly fell on the manuscript of *Soft Laughter*. Diana was a second too late to hide it under a magazine, and the next moment he had picked it up amid a horrid silence. 'Hul-lo, hullo, hullo!' he said slowly, as the title page took significance, and gave an impressed whistle.

'It's just a play,' said Diana weakly, looking agonies at Robin over his head.

'Yeah,' said Garstin, 'so I see.'

He opened it at the first page and skimmed one or two lines swiftly. Then he turned to Robin. 'Would you let me read it?' he asked respectfully.

'Why, yes,' said Robin uncertainly, 'though it's not really worth——' He broke off miserably. Garstin was going to poke fun at his play. It was harrowing.

'I think I'll go upstairs and change,' said Diana, who felt it was all her fault for not remembering about the manuscript and hiding it in time.

'You'd better go along too, Robin,' Ada suggested. They climbed the stairs together, leaving Garstin browsing down the first page and Ada eyeing him sternly.

Outside her door Diana paused and caught his hand. 'I'm sorry, Robin,' she said. 'I'd give anything for it not to have happened.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Robin nobly. 'Anyway, stacks of people'll have to read it who'll think it even funnier than Garstin.'

They were both aware that the short time for dreaming had gone. They were now up against cold, unrelenting reality, and *Soft Laughter* suddenly dwindled from a fine and haughty thing to a small and defenceless target for ridicule.

Robin climbed out of his bathing suit and then sat on the bed apathetically, tracing the pattern on the carpet with his toe. Years before he had once had his essay read out in class because it was the worst and marked two out of ten for neatness, and had had to stand next

to the master's desk facing the class, who were pitiless little bastards and rolled with forced and sycophantic laughter. The incident returned in all its potency. Garstin was, this very minute, reading *Soft Laughter* downstairs. A hot, shameful blush coursed up from behind his ears and made the sunburn tickle. He despised himself for ever believing that any one as damn silly as he was could write a play that wasn't. He pulled his shirt on and groped under the wardrobe for his shoes dejectedly.

'Garstin,' said Ada suddenly, when they had been left alone, 'what murky plot is twitching in that little mud-pie of a brain of yours?'

'No plot,' said Garstin pleasantly, looking up from the script. 'Just mud-pie.'

'If you make fun of that boy's play to him I'll slay you.'

'Sweet Ada, lovely Ada,' said Garstin, 'why do you wrong me? These pants are sackcloth and my singlet ashes. I'm doing penance.'

Ada, unmoved, put her hands in her pockets, and surveyed him briskly.

'Come on now, you polyp,' she ordered. 'Which one are you in love with?'

Garstin slapped the manuscript shut and sat up aghast.

'Well, *Ada!*' he said in pain.

'That's no answer,' Ada made return. 'You're out for something, and I'm keen to know what.'

'I swear solemnly,' said Garstin, 'that I'm out to gain nothing.'

'Then you're pimping,' said Ada FitzGerald. 'You can't fool me, Garstin Bannock. My God,' she added, 'to think that the day you were born I begged Sharman to drop you in a bucket of water, and he wouldn't!'

Garstin lay back and gazed up at her weakly.

'Now *what*,' he begged, 'have I done to call all this down on my head? I mean, after all, *Ada!* I come in here exuding goodwill and friendliness to all living things, everybody's friend, and in return I get called a

mud-pie, a polyp and a pimp. Some people,' he pointed out ' would consider it unwarranted.'

' Listen, my cousin twice removed but not removed far enough,' said Ada with significance, ' the first suspicion of anything untoward and you go out on your ear! I can't say fairer. Whatever snares you lay for them in London they'll have to grapple with as best they can; but while they're here there'll be no snares. The only spare bed's in Robin's room. I shall tie your foot to the bed-rail when you turn in to-night and arm him with a piece of lead piping and a police whistle. If you read that play, think over what you're going to say about it three times carefully, and then come and say it in front of me first. One false step, Garstin Bannock, and you're pork.'

' Ada,' said Garstin from the heart, ' when I die it will be found that you were the only person I ever loved.'

' Go and wash for supper,' said Ada FitzGerald unmoved, and went out on to the lawn to fetch the rugs in.

§

The night proved as cold as the day had been hot, and at half-past ten they went up to bed and left Garstin alone downstairs.

His good behaviour during the evening had filled them with a nervous uncertainty as to where and how the lightning was going to strike next. The B.B.C. (like ministering angels) had come to their rescue with such an atrocious musical comedy that condemnation of it bridged the gulf between its close and half-past ten, when (as stated) they went straight up to bed and left Garstin downstairs, well knowing him to be plotting devilries.

Long after, when Robin had plunged into dreamless slumber, he was hurried back from it to the bedroom by vigorous shaking. Believing this to be a massed offensive on the part of Garstin, he sprang wildly from his

couch and stood in a defensive attitude, blinking in the electric-light.

'O.K., O.K., O.K.!' said Garstin soothingly, proving to be fully dressed and under control. 'Nobody's going to hurt you! Roll back to bed, unsullied.' Self-consciously Robin climbed back into bed and looked at him questioningly. Garstin lit a cigarette and sat on his hot-water bottle. 'I have just finished your play,' he said measuredly. 'You may or may not know it, but you've got a play there. In my opinion a damn good one. I had to read it right through without a break. By the way, am I wrong, or is your bed on fire?'

The true facts being made known to him and the water-bottle removed to a safe place, Garstin proceeded. 'Now, I don't want to depress you,' he said, thereby causing a lead weight to fall upon Robin's hopes, 'and whatever I say you can take for what it's worth; but I happen to know what I'm talking about on the subject of plays. Firstly, you don't stand a dog's chance of placing it. That's not any fault of the play's—or yours—don't jump to conclusions—it's that just there're too many factors against you. One,' said Garstin, lifting his thumb; 'you haven't got backing behind you to turn to if pushed. That cuts down your markets by ninety per cent. Two, you haven't got a name.' He settled himself comfortably against the foot of the bed. 'Name and money are the only credentials asked of the general public trying to crash the theatre.'

Robin found that he was listening raptly, as one hanging upon the lips of a minor prophet. 'That part you've written of the young musician couldn't suit the Middleton better if you'd been commissioned to write it for him. Now, the Middleton's only got to snap his fingers and your play's bought. Mind you, this is only supposition. He may think the play's lousy. But I've got a feeling in the pit of my lunch that he'll go crazy over it. Now, look. When you get back to London, just meet the boy socially, and see how you feel about letting him read the play.'

'But I *have* met him,' Robin interrupted, 'and he wasn't particularly impressed.'

'Ah, nuts,' said Garstin; 'you can't expect him to give careful study to every one he lifts in a taxi. And anyway, how do you know he wasn't particularly impressed? He wasn't likely to chuck his arms round your neck and kiss you as you got out of the cab just because he liked the way your nose turns up at the end. If you leave it to me I'll fix it—lunch at the Ivy—he'll pay—and whatever he does, no harm'll have been done.'

'It's very kind of you,' said Robin after a pause. 'I'll speak to Diana about it.'

'Swell,' said Garstin. 'And Gardner, old pal, just one last thing. Keep personal ties out of business or go out of business—and that goes for any business, not just the theatre.' He rolled off the bed and wandered across to his own. 'Now go off to bye-byes,' he concluded, 'and put your trust in Garstin Bannock. This time you'll get a cigar or a coco-nut.' He shed his clothes, climbed into his pyjamas, switched off the light, and after a while his snores filtered musically across the room.

Robin lay gazing up at the ceiling in wakeful reverie, going over what Garstin had said, and realizing more and more clearly as he thought it over how very right and sensible Garstin had been about it all. He wasn't such a bad chap, Garstin. He had serious faults and was loose in a lot of ways, but seemed to have two quite separate personalities, so actually the thing was to concentrate on the one personality and assiduously avoid the other, which ought to be perfectly possible and result in quite a happy compromise. He'd talk to Diana about it first thing in the morning.

From Land's End Garstin sent the following letter to the Middleton :

'Honoured Sir,

'We beg to report arrival at Land's End whole in mind and limb, and with much of import to acquaint you.

We called as exhorted at the FitzGerald manse, and found your all unsuspecting prey indulging in halcyon love-dreams with the equally unsuspecting prey of your 'umble servant now with pen in hand. I have said once, and will say again before proceeding, that the Gardner is a belluva hard nut to crack, and I very much doubt if even your prettiest pirouettes will entice him from his path to that of Higher Thoughts; still, you know your own limitations better than I. It is going to take more trouble than you think. I've laid the foundations of a Scheme de luxe which you can carry through to its logical conclusion in your own inimitable way. He has written a play which is no better or worse than a first play should be, and could stand a production with no great loss of dignity to yourself or Potash and Perlmutter if they're still inside the law.

'In a nut, as it were, I have roused in the Angel child a gleam of trust and confidence in you which you must nurture into bloom yourself; and will present him for lunch when we're all back in London. A word o' warning, shipmate. Play him verree careful. Don't rush your hedges, or he'll be off like a stag. If you want him as much as you led me to believe, the production of his play should be the merest bagatelle. As long as you keep him busy enough to neglect his other interests, I shall consider myself amply rewarded for any small service I may have done you. The holiday so far has been without incident, save for a brief skirmish with a blonde in the hotel this afternoon. She has asked me to go up to her room and look at her snaps after dinner. I shall go up and look at her snaps after dinner.

*'I am, Sir, 'Yours to command,
'Garstin B.'*

When Garstin's letter reached the Middleton he was breakfasting in bed, and put aside an egg to read it at once. As he was finishing, Agatha Penn came out of the bathroom to borrow his talcum, and something about the expression on his face rang the burglar-alarm in her intuition and she paused.

'Who's the *billet-doux* framm?' she inquired off-handedly.

' Garstin,' said the Middleton, folding it carelessly.

Miss Penn's face portrayed repugnance.

' What's the little wart writing you letters about ? ' she said with a hint of ire.

' He's found a play for me.'

' You *got* five plays arn hand as it is. What's the catch about this one ? '

The Middleton shrugged disinterestedly. ' You know Garstin,' he remarked. ' It's probably about something that'd give the Censor a stroke.'

Miss Penn curled up on the bed beside him, suddenly cordial. ' Doug, my honey,' she said persuasively, ' can I tawk to you about sumthin personal ? '

The Middleton took a cigarette from the side of the bed and lit it, and burned Garstin's letter with the match. ' Why not ? ' he asked reasonably. ' But button up your dressing-gown.'

' O.K.,' said Miss Penn obligingly, and did. ' It's about Garstin Bannock.'

' Whom you hate right lustily,' said Douglas, ' and would like to see kicked to death by rogue mustangs. Is this his final notice to quit ? '

' Yeah,' said Miss Penn. ' *Please*, honey.'

The Middleton sighed.

' You would never grudge a beautiful nature the company of other beautiful natures,' he said. ' Why, then, grudge my awful one the company of one even worse ? '

Miss Penn removed the breakfast tray to the table before continuing.

' Do you remember about three weeks ago, giving a handsome young guy a lift in our taxi ? ' she asked.

' No,' answered Douglas after a pause, vaguely. ' Why ? '

' His name was Robin Gardner.'

' So what ? '

' That letter from Garstin was about him.'

' And the Taj Mahal. How *was* the Taj Mahal ? '

' And Garstin's up to something about as healthy as a drain-pipe.'

The Middleton settled comfortably back amongst the pillows and gazed at her obliquely, gently purring. 'What a comic little woman it is !' he said.

Miss Penn leaned forward earnestly.

'Doug,' she said. 'I shut my eyes to a lart of things—I guess a dame's got to if she's that way about a guy that's all glands and come-hither. I never said a wurd when you went gay with Lottie Osgood back home, though I felt pretty sick. I guess six million dollars is six million dollars, even if you gotta jump in a pig-sty to get it. I kinda hoped that when we came over here you'd pull up. And I guess you haven't.'

The Middleton ran his fingers through her hair, but tactfully waited for her to go on. She eyed him reproachfully and pulled at the top button of his pyjama-coat.

'Have you?' she pursued.

'No,' said Douglas, with great honesty. 'I have not.'

'And you nevur will?'

'Never.'

'Why not, Doug? You ain't a hundred per cent. lousy. At least, I like to think so. What about a clean-up, starting with Garstin Bannock?'

'When Garstin Bannock's served his purpose he'll go,' he promised. 'Does that console you at all? At the moment he amuses me, but he's very limited. His term of office is nearly done.'

Agatha Penn drew back slightly.

'And how much longer has mine to go?' she inquired in a steady voice.

The Middleton remained silent, and she shook him by the pyjama button. 'It's a bad time to go dumb, honey,' she said with a note of warning in her voice. 'I've bent a perfectly good career in half on your account, and I'd like to know what I stand to make on it.'

For answer the Middleton pulled her across him and kissed her.

'That's no answer,' said Miss Penn when free:

'If you remember,' Douglas returned, 'I did all in

my little power to stop you bending your career, and you announced in ringing tones that your place was by my side, and that I'd oblige if I minded my own something rude business.'

'Well, and if I did?' countered Miss Penn defiantly. 'So what?'

'It's late in the day to start throwing in governing clauses.'

'I get it. No clean-up?'

'No clean-up.'

'I wouldn't be surprised but one day I shoot you in the belly, Doug Middleton, just to see you die laffing.'

'If,' the Middleton gave canny answer, 'you were the sort of woman who shot her loves in the belly just to see them die laughing, there'd be many miles of surging Atlantic between your lily-white bosom and mine, my sweet. Anyway,' he added, 'I defy any one to die laughing after being shot in the belly.'

'Ah, I give up,' said Miss Penn, rolling off the bed and sweeping her robes about her. 'I'm crazy anyway,' and went back to the bathroom.

When the happy roar of taps welled up, the Middleton picked up the 'phone and dictated a cable to Charlotte Osgood, 'Ye Moated Grange,' Long Island. '*Everybody*,' it said, '*who is anybody is coming to Europe this season*,' and signed it 'Doug.'

§

In 1883 an earthquake caught New Dover, Wis., by the seat of its trousers and shook it till its teeth rattled, and one of the direct results was Lottie Osgood.

While buildings were still rocking drunkenly and the citizens of New Dover were rushing their belongings desperately into the streets, Ma Klutterbuck delivered herself of Lottie in a small pine-shack which stood in the part of the town that was never pointed out to tourists and was too small to fall down.

She lay propped up, smoking a corn-cob pipe grimly, while the universe tottered about her and the infant Lottie squealed blue murder as a panic-stricken young doctor tried to keep his mind off the earthquake and on his job and made a poor show of both. Pa Klutterbuck stood holding the storm-lantern and muttering prayers in Swedish.

'Tree days too oily,' said Ma Klutterbuck with ill-concealed chagrin, 'all because of a goddam ertquakers (Klutterbuck kape dat lantin foim or I get oop and bat you) and den it has to be a goil! Hell for de waste of trubble!' She puffed furiously and watched the doctor with contempt as he leapt at every fresh alarm from without.

Farther up the street Moodie's Saloon swayed forward into the street and then fell with a loud crash on to the Ginsburgs' furniture. Moodie's cries of woe rose up, backed by the screams of the ladies to whom his saloon had been as home and the anguished dirging of the Ginsburgs, who were still paying off on the furniture.

'Dat's da saloon gone,' said Mrs. Malandrinotta languidly from the door. 'Malandrinotta, 'e notta come 'ome boozy no more. Tanka da God.'

'It ain't hoit de babby's lungs none,' Klutterbuck submitted, changing the lantern over to steady a shelf of saucepans.

'She'll be all right,' said the doctor, and climbed wearily to his knees.

'Wonderful 'ow nobody been kilt,' remarked Mrs. Malandrinotta, peering up the street, with a tinge of disappointment. 'But it ainta feenish yet.'

'What we owe you, Doc?' asked Klutterbuck, fumbling in his pocket.

'One dollar fifty,' said the doctor.

'It ain't woit it,' said Ma Klutterbuck flatly, removing the corn-cob pipe. 'Give him twenty-five cents.'

'Make it dollar?' Klutterbuck suggested.

Two more buildings hit the dust outside. The doctor leapt spasmodically.

'All right,' he said, and took it meekly.

To their dying days the Klutterbucks bitterly regretted that dollar.

'Dat kid o' youse,' Mrs. Malandrinotta remarked, when Lottie was five, 'looka like she cut out for da swing on da tree wid da rope.'

As Malandrinotta had only recently left his wife *via* da tree wid da rope, Mrs. Malandrinotta was considered to have spoken with authority, and her opinion was treated with respect by all save the wretched Lottie, who hit her in the haunch as she stood.

Still, this is not an account of Lottie Klutterbuck's early reprisals. The earthquake incident was only mentioned to throw light on her behaviour later, which might otherwise have appeared incomprehensible to the rational mind.

At thirteen she left New Dover with a travelling road-show, and appeared for a time with outstanding success as Little Liva, Little Lord Fauntleroy, Little Willie (in *East Lynne*), and a bloodhound, off, during the ice-floe scene of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and then graduated to Dearest and Lady Isobel when her predecessor died of alcohol poisoning in Massachusetts, but still played the bloodhound, off, in the ice-floe scene to keep her voice in trim.

Her first love was Barney (Bughouse) Schwartz, who owned the road-show and played Simon Legree alternate nights with the actor who played Uncle Tom, thereby keeping out of a rut; and though he made a rotten Legree and an even worse Uncle Tom, he made a great lover. In 1900 he was shot in the boot for cheating at cards in Texas and died (under the misapprehension that a shoal of bullets had entered his back) from fright, leaving *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *East Lynne* to Lottie by deed poll. Until 1913 Lottie carried on, an Ada Isaacs Menken in her own small way, playing the American towns from coast to coast with a leading man from a New Orleans saloon who looked like John Barrymore but spoke with a potato in his voice through adenoids. He is worthy of note as the first young man Lottie ever kept; for keep him she

did, though his acting drove even uncritical hicks to pungent comment when he held the stage for more than two lines of dialogue, and the cast came to her singly and in bodies regularly to beg his dismissal. The retaining of the leading man from New Orleans proved an expensive indulgence, for the box-office receipts fell off slowly but firmly until Lottie's nest-egg was well and truly addled and the Schwartz Players disbanded voluntarily, leaving her high and dry, with the young man on her hands, sixty miles from New York.

Now Lottie at thirty had lost much that Schwartz had found endearing. She had run to fat, though seldom in the places that could take it, and years of playing the bloodhound, off, from habit, had done harsh things to her vocal cords, so that her voice now shook its hearers like a Wurlitzer organ in full boom. *Sans* her nest-egg, these liabilities became dazzlingly apparent to the young man from New Orleans in the cruel light of hard fact, and he sneaked back to the saloon in New Orleans when her back was turned for a moment.

Deserted, Lottie wept for the best part of an afternoon, and then made for New York. In the train she met Kappy Osgood, who ran a retail grocery business near East River Terrace and banked a hundred dollars a month. Something in Lottie awoke the savage in him. She topped him by a foot, and his fingers just met when he put his arms round her, but Mr. Osgood had found his Woman, and had hardly known her long enough to call her Lottie before he laid his grocery business at her feet and made a noise like a mating cry.

Lottie took him. The novelty of a settled existence, without money worries and drunken actors, appealed to her too strongly to be resisted, and she became Mrs. Osgood and enjoyed it a lot.

Kappy made a good husband, and the business continued to bring in the monthly hundred dollars in all weathers. Then the War broke out, and Kappy showed sudden vision by buying up Condensed Milk as fast as he could go.

When America entered the War, he slapped his own

labels on to the tins and sent them back on the market as a 100 per cent. American product at three times what they had cost him. The market was almost dry of Condensed Milk—thanks principally to Kappy—and after half his stock had been snatched up wildly, he put his prices up another 300 per cent. and sold the second half with even greater ease than he had the first. It gave him a clear profit of two million dollars. Here Kappy would have been content to sit back and relax, but now Lottie came forward, a stone heavier, and drove him ever upwards. For fifty thousand dollars he was permitted to supply the American Army in Europe with things in cans to eat. At the end of the War Osgood's Grocery Chain was born, and thrived, and Lottie crashed Society. The impact hurt Lottie more than it did Society, but she picked herself up, took a course in etiquette, hired a private elocutionist, bought the house on Long Island, and slowly mowed down all obstacles.

On receiving the Middleton's cable, which she took as an arch compliment, she had her trunks packed and caught the *Bremen*, which was tough on the *Bremen*, and landed in Southampton at the end of the next chapter.

CHAPTER IX

'See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!'

ADA FITZGERALD drove Diana and Robin into Brighton to catch the train back to London. They had just alighted outside the station and were collecting luggage and other impedimenta in brown-paper parcels from the back, when a small two-seater suddenly swung over from the other side of the road, narrowly missing a landlady, and pulled up beside them, and Christopher Lovell leant forward and gazed out through a tear in the hood. 'Hullo, there!' he said. 'Thought I recognized you! Just going back to London?'

'Why, hullo, Mr. Lovell!' Diana made return.

How nice to see you again! Yes, we are. Going back to London.'

'Hullo!' said Robin, appearing out of the back of Ada Fitzgerald's car at the sound of his voice. 'Ada, this is Mr. Lovell! You remember—we told you about him.'

'Oh yes!' said Ada. 'I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Lovell. You're the Good Samaritan, aren't you?'

'Complete with moke,' nodded Christopher Lovell, slapping the Austin, which made a hollow noise, 'and I'm just going back to London too. Would you consider doing the journey in horrible discomfort along with me, or do you prefer trains? Because I'm very partial to company on long drives. What say?'

'I'd love to,' said Diana with no hesitation.

'It'd be grand,' agreed Robin. 'What about all our luggage though?'

'There's enough space in the dickey for two rooms and a bath. Hang on and I'll unlock it.' He climbed out on the other side, and they all met round at the back and fell to squeezing the luggage into a quarter of its minimum cubic density.

'You can't say you two don't get a lucky break occasionally,' Ada remarked as they stood back triumphant at last. 'Let's all have a drink before we go on our ways.'

'We're practically drunk,' Christopher assured her cordially, and they went into the Station Buffet and had beer.

'Well,' he said, when quenched, 'you two look a lot more cheerful than you did the last time our paths crossed!'

'So do you,' Diana pointed out.

'True, lady, true! I've broken my two years' duck. I'm going back to do a show at the Embassy. I've got a feeling my luck's turned at last.'

'Oh, I *am* glad!' said Diana warmly. 'You must be terribly pleased!'

'I am,' admitted Christopher, and accepted congratulations all round. 'Good part, as a matter of fact.'

Tough guy. Sort of English gangster. Not big, mind you, but a cameo. I got the wire this morning.' He smiled benignly at an advertisement for cider. ' Funny what a pleasant place the world can be, isn't it ? '

' Another beer all round called for,' said Ada, ' to celebrate a pleasant world.'

So they had another beer all round, and then went back to the Austin and bade farewell to Ada and told her how they couldn't begin to thank her and then began, and kissed her warmly and watched her drive out of sight before they all climbed into the Austin and set out for London.

At first, because the world actually *was* a pleasant place, they sang, and when they had sung everything they knew and a lot they didn't, they told Christopher about the play and sketched the plot for him roughly, which he found hard to follow, as they invariably spoke at the same time and the Austin was rattling its heart out over the country roads.

' Who are you sending it to ? ' he shouted above the Austin when they had finished the plot and lay back wheezing.

' Douglas Middleton,' Robin shouted back.

' Who's he ? ' asked Christopher.

' An actor. He's just come back from America. He did *God's Stepchildren*. Didn't you ever hear about it ? '

' I suppose so,' said Christopher vaguely. ' But one forgets so easily. If he doesn't take it, let me see it ? If it's any good I'll get the Embassy to read it.'

The Austin flew at a hill and went into second.

' Thank you very much,' said Robin.

' What ? Can't hear ! Shout ! ' returned Christopher.

' I said: " Thank you very much " ! ' shouted Robin obediently.

' Oh ! ' he shouted back. ' That's all right ! '

They topped the hill and slid back to top.

' She's pulling very well,' said Diana, as a compliment.

' Isn't she ? ' agreed Christopher, proud of her.

' Considering there're three people aboard and she's

eight years old. I say, if you sell your play and want a producer, keep the Lovell in mind. You'd never think it to look at me, but I'm a good producer.'

Robin said he would most certainly keep the Lovell in mind.

They talked about the Sussex country for a while in a flattering way, and then Christopher said, 'By the way, I hope you didn't take any notice of what I said bringing you home in the car that night. I must have sounded pretty encouraging to any one just going into the business.'

'Then it *isn't* really as bad as you made it out?,' asked Diana.

'Well—when you're out of work you're inclined to concentrate on one side of the theatre and shut your eyes to the other.'

'I'm so glad you said that,' said Diana thankfully. 'When we got home Robin believed it was all like you said it was, and I said I was sure that was only one side of it, and he didn't really believe me.'

'Which goes to show,' said Christopher, 'that I talk too much. Take my tip,' he said, 'in this business never say what you think. Nobody expects it and nobody wants it. Flatter everybody and everything. It's only convention. You don't have to mean it. I've blundered about long enough being frank and honest, and all it's done is to keep me out of work two years, and serves me right. Be warned by my awful fate!'

He was a curious sort of person, Diana decided. Somehow he just seemed to miss being anything positive, and knew it himself; which people like that didn't usually. He was not quite handsome, and not quite charming, and not quite bitter and not quite resigned to it, and obviously unhappy about it inside, and one felt he would never become either completely positive or completely negative, but would hang undecidedly between the two for the rest of his life and never get anywhere important, all of which wouldn't be so sad if he didn't know it himself.

For the rest of the journey they talked about things that were comfortably removed from anything personal, such as new plays coming on and who was in them and what sort of chance they had of a run, and found that Christopher was a sort of walking encyclopædia of the theatre and knew about every one and what they could do and couldn't do; which made it strange that he hadn't recalled the Middleton's name when mentioned.

When they arrived at Ebury Street he helped them carry the luggage upstairs, but wouldn't stay to tea, though before he left he wrote his address and telephone number on the flap of a cigarette carton, and took theirs and said that they must all do a gallery sometime before his show went on at the Embassy, and that he'd fix it up and let them know what day, and as they were going down the stairs with him Miss Abernethy popped up from the basement and they met in the hall.

'Ah, Miss Shand, so you're bark!' she said with great good humour, popping the thimble like a pneumatic road-drill. 'And Meester Gardner, I do declare! Hoo did you enjoy youer holiday?' And then, just as Diana and Robin were going to tell her how much, she caught sight of Christopher, and her face lit up in recognition. 'Well, if ut *isn't* Meester Lovell!' she said with extravagant amazement.

'Hullo, Abbie!' said Meester Lovell, looking suddenly sheepish. 'Don't say I left owing you a month's rent or something, or I shall weep into the potted palm.'

'Of course note!' returned Miss Abernethy. 'But many's the tame I've wondered whatever became of you after you left!'

'You remembered me sometimes?' asked Christopher sentimentally.

'Often!' Miss Abernethy assured him. 'It tuke quite a while to get used to you no being heer.' She turned to Diana and Robin. 'You nevair saw sich a gay young man in your life as Mr. Lovell—rushing awa up the stairs and down them as if he was a bull in a china-shop, and singing till the peppul used to complain, and always laffing and chattering—and then suddenly he

packs his bags and awa oot he goes wi'oot so much as a wee bit explanation, and I've no seen him for years until this minute !'

She turned back to Christopher and frowned with one eyebrow. 'Mind ye, I've heard things from tame to tame, but I wouldna give them credit for being the truth, but they didna fecht in wi' you as I used to know y'ou. I dare say they were juist a pack o' lies. Some one once told me you'd taken to the drink.'

'Yes,' said Christopher blandly. 'True. I did. But it's all back in the dim, dim past, Abbie.'

'On account o' the Particular Perrson?' asked Miss Abernethy mysteriously.

'On no other,' he affirmed.

'Have you ever had truck wi' her since?'

'No. She's in Hollywood. She married a camera-man, but even that didn't make him want to photograph her. She's a mother of three now. Triplets, it's whispered.

Miss Abernethy leaned forward confidently.

'You were well oot o' that, Mr. Lovell,' she said sagely. 'I thought that all along. I'm only mighty sorry you tuke to the drink, for she wasna worth it.'

'It took the drink to make me find out though, Abbie.'

'And what wuk have you been doing? I've no seen your name in the peppers lately, though I've loked.' So she was told about his being out of work for two years, and about the job at the Embassy, and was sympathetic and pleased, and insisted that his luck had turned and then remembered that she had left a pie in the oven downstairs and had to rush away, rustling like a monsoon, with a haphazard good-bye pelted over her shoulder.

They gazed on Christopher with a new interest. An unsuccessful love-affair filled in the blank and explained him. They suddenly felt terribly sorry for him and liked him. He caught the new light in their eyes and backed from it.

'Well,' he said, 'now that Abbie's opened my

'cupboard doors and sent my skeletons rattling on to the floor, I'll make my adieus and vanish! Don't forget we're doing a gallery next week. Good luck with the play!' and was into the Austin and away.

They went back upstairs and began making tea. As Robin knelt over the gas-ring and cleaned it with a match, and Diana was getting the tea-things out of the soap-box cupboard behind the door, she suddenly sat on the edge of the bed with a saucer in one hand and a cup in the other and said, 'Oh, Robin—*poor* Christopher Lovell!' with such deep pity that for no reason at all he felt a pang of wild jealousy, though only for two seconds.

When they got back from the Studio the next day there was a post card from Garstin awaiting them. '*I have wangled lunch,*' it informed them, '*with the Middleton for Tuesday, 1.30, Ivy. Put on your best bib and tucker and bring the play. I've got him really interested, I think, though you can't tell till he's read it.*'

And now you are to meet Meadowsweet and Angusson again, which ought to be nice for you.

A Woman Against the World (Meadson Production) had found the world too much for her after five performances and a matinee, and had come off with a small whistling noise and some unkind words of parting from the gallery. This time Meadowsweet and Angusson felt the cold hand of death closing about Meadson Productions, and a life-long friendship began to totter in the general panic. They had seldom quarrelled in the past, and only occasionally since the Depression, but over *A Woman Against the World* anger flowed unleashed and blood-pressure received no thought.

The glass pot-hole where the secretary sat and typed was rocking with the vibration of their battle, and the office-boy had swallowed his marble sweet from pure fright and lay choking in the reception-room. A picture of Jack Buchanan (who had never had dealings with them and didn't even know them) fell from its hook in the smaller office and lay in the thousand fragments. Mr. Meadowsweet's aitches had gone the way of all

flesh and he swore in pure Russian around, above, and below his cigar (which never got in the way once) and Mr. Angusson, who could speak like Mr. Hibbert announcing the Second News if he wanted to, had gone shrill and hysterical and back to Nature. Hark at him now.

'*You* told me?' he demanded wildly. '*You* told me? Orright, tell me someth'ing else, Joe! Tell me someth'ing else, that's all I'm asking! Who *bought* this play, hey? You or me, hey? Who *tolding* me've got the drama of the century, but not vhat century! Packed houses for two years, wasn't it? Anudder *Ten-minute Alibi*, wasn't it?' He gave a harsh, mirthless cry. 'Seven hundred pounds! I'm laffing! Look at me laffing!'

Stung, Meadowsweet took three quick bounces across the office and landed up panting at Angusson across the desk.

'You tryin' to blaming *me*?' he volleyed back hotly. 'You trying to blaming *me*?'

'Who vas it I was going to blame if it ain't you?' asked Angusson.

'You! Yourself!' keened Meadowsweet.

'Me? *Me*! Didn't I told you all along the public *don't vant* this kind of play? Didn't I pleading mit you? Didn't *every one* pleading mit you? Didn't even the office-boy say it vas the rottenest play he ever read? Yes, he did, because I vas here and I hoid him—and now you *tolding* me I gotter blame myself! You're mad, that's vhat, Joe! You're mad!'

Meadowsweet danced up and down speechlessly for a moment, and then shook himself and found tongue. 'Why is it every time we got a success *you* done it and every time you got a flop *I* done it?' he inquired fiercely. 'You didn't sign no contracts, did it? No! It was me! I done everyt'ing! I got Lucy Erding to play the lead, din't I?—and yoi! what a bum lead!'

'Lucy Erding don't come into this!' Angusson broke in warningly.

'No?' returned Meadowsweet with top-heavy

sarcasm. 'It wasn't Lucy Erding that got raspberries in her big love scene, oughtn't it? You didn't choosing the woist actress in the Biritish Isles and Canada, did she? No! It's *me* what Lucy Erding lives with! I done everyt'ing!'

'Ain't you a partner in the business? Ain't you draw fifty per cent. profits? If it's all my fault, vhy isn't it you vasn't stopping me? Why dja *let* me contract Lucy Erding? Why dja *let* me put the play on if it vas lousy, hey?' Angusson shook a fist in the air. 'I'll *tell* yu vhy, Joe! You let me because you toight it vas a good play and Lucy Erding vas a good actress, that's vhy!' He leant forward over the desk and bared his teeth. 'Go on! Deny it! Deny it, Joe!' he challenged ferociously, thereby daunting Meadowsweet for the moment. In sheer defence Meadowsweet switched to tactic number two. He fell back a few paces and gazed at Angusson with injured contempt and pity.

'Ain't you ashamed, Angusson,' he inquired, 'that you can looking me in the ice and talk lies? I would be. All along I said this was going to happening, and you tolding me I was talking nuts.'

'All right!' Angusson fired back like a flash. 'All right! I picked a lousy play and a lousy actress to act in it! I done it all, Lucy Erding an' everything! Now tell me vhat you do in this business if I do all the vork? Is it an office-boy? We got one! Fifty per cent. of the returns you draw for doing nudding! You're sitting pretty, ain't you?'

'Tell me how I'm drawing fifty per cent. of the returns when there ain't no returns,' Meadowsweet begged, aggrieved. 'Does the office-boy pay fifty per cent. of your losses?'

'My losses?' Angusson gave cry, clutching at the desk. 'My losses, is it? I ain't paying out *one* penny on the show, Meadowsweet, get it? Not a penny!' Here the 'phone cut him short, and he dashed it to his ear. 'Vat--what is it? We're in conference!'

'Mr. Middleton's here to see you,' said the secretary, clinging to her end of the line like a Casabianca.

'Tell him we're busy!' Angusson rapped back.

'He's got an appointment, though.'

Angusson let loose a roar. 'Well, do I have to see every Tom, Dick, and Willie what comes here just because they got an appointment?' he demanded.

'Tell him to go *away*, will you!'

'Hoity-toity,' said the Middleton from the door.

'The Bing Boys celebrate a flop.'

Meadowsweet and Angusson became Meadson again and turned on him.

'What you want?' Meadowsweet requested unsociably.

'That door's marked Private!' Angusson pointed out.

'Yes, but your scene wasn't,' the Middleton made answer, laying aside a hat and a stick and seating himself in the guest chair. 'Like to hear a story about six million dollars?'

'You needn't think we forgotten the *God's Step-children* contract,' Angusson assured him coldly, resetting his collar and pulling his cravat down from behind his car. 'Take your six million dollars to Binkie Beaumont or somebody. We ain't doing business with you no more, Middleton.'

'Goodness gracious,' the Middleton returned, pained; 'where's that lovely Oxford burr gone, Angusson?'

'Never mind about my Oxford burr,' said Angusson, colouring richly, adopting it again at once. 'What do you want here? I warn you, we're not being caught out twice with the same trick——'

'I asked you if you'd like to hear a story about six million dollars,' the Middleton repeated, taking one of Meadowsweet's cigars and leaning back comfortably. 'And you can't say No and attend Synagogue with a clear conscience on Saturday. It's six million dollars' potential backing, all lying about waiting to be scooped up by Potash and Perlmutter Inc. with the help of Douglas Middleton, who takes a small agent's fee for bringing every one together — say fifteen per cent.?''

'We're not interested,' said Angusson flatly.

'Until we see the six million,' Meadowsweet supplemented.

'Not even then,' Angusson decreed, with a swift look of rage at Meadowsweet.

'The six million,' Douglas proceeded, assured of their undivided attention, 'sailed on the *Bremen* the day before yesterday and all too soon will be in our midst. It will be in London a few days and then leave for the Moxor Hotel in Paris by Imperial Airways for a fortnight's fun and games with the French, watched carefully by me, and then brought back to London to be fleeced by a Meadson Production.'

'Whatchermean, fleeced?' Meadowsweet demanded virtuously. 'Anyway, we're not interested—— Are we, Angusson?' he added with a note of uncertainty.

'Angusson is,' said Douglas. 'The six million have his car. Not so, Angusson?'

'Who owns them?' asked Angusson warily.

'Lottie Osgood, or "Love-in-a-mist" Lottie to intimates.'

'Oh!' said Angusson. 'One of those?'

'One of those,' nodded the Middleton. 'Believe it or not, you and Lenin are feeding her lunch at the Ritz as soon as I give the O.K., and you're going to sell her a play called *Soft Laughter*, for immediate production.'

'Who wrote it?' Meadowsweet inquired alertly.

'You wouldn't know, if I said Shakespeare,' said Douglas crushingly. 'Just listen, Meadowsweet, and play with your cigar. This play's a winner as far as writing goes. Properly handled it'd run a year. I play the lead, Angus, at seventy pounds a week, and I approve the author's contract before he signs. You'll give him five per cent. gross and all his film rights.'

'We'll *what*?' asked Meadowsweet thickly.

'It's all right. You can make it up on Lottie. I don't mind how you sting her once my terms are in black and white.'

'Where's the catch?' Angusson inquired calmly.

'There isn't one, this trip. I just happen to have

reasons why I don't want to be in on the production side, even unofficially.'

'I see—so you don't have to go to Dartmoor with Meadowsweet and me afterwards?'

The Middleton sighed with a trace of impatience. 'Grow up, Angus,' he beseeched. 'I'm making a straightforward suggestion. If you want to take it—you can rake in as much as you think's wise. If not, there are twenty managers who'd jump at the chance, and I'm wasting my time.'

'Have *you* read the play?' Meadowsweet interrupted accusingly.

'No. Would it make any difference to you if I had?'

'I don't touch it till our office-boy's read it,' said Meadowsweet firmly. 'He reads all our plays.'

'I gathered that from your last one,' said Douglas pleasantly. 'Which reminds me. There's one other stipulation. Miss Erding isn't to play the lead.'

'Oh?' said Angusson, turning pink. 'And what's wrong with Miss Erding?'

'Nothing,' Douglas assured him, 'except that the public don't feel about her the way you do, not having seen her in the nodd.'

'Something in that,' Meadowsweet granted disloyally.

'That's enough about Miss Erding,' said Angusson crisply. 'About the rest, you talked us into putting our trust in you over *God's Stepchildren*, and by a criminal alteration of one of the clauses we drew about a thousand a week less than we should have if you hadn't betrayed that trust. You're the lowest double-crosser we ever did business with, Middleton, and I'd sooner go bankrupt than do any more! That's final!'

'Now I'm school-girl complexion all over,' said Douglas, stubbing out the cigar and rising gracefully. 'The top o' the marnin' to you, Mr. O'Hooligan. I'll take my business down the street.' He picked up the hat and the stick, and Meadowsweet gave an open cry of dismay.

'There's no point in rushing anything,' said Angusson placatingly, edging unobtrusively round to the door.

'Maybe I didn't mean that about you being the lowest double-crosser we ever did business with, Middleton.'

'And maybe you did,' said Middleton. 'Out of my way.'

'Wait a minute,' said Angusson, squeezing a smile. 'Let's go over the idea again. There may be something in it, after all!'

'Well, do you know, that wouldn't surprise me, Angusson,' Douglas returned, eyeing the smile with frank curiosity, 'but aren't you hurting yourself doing that?'

'I'll be frank with you, Middleton,' Angusson offered handsomely. 'We're interested in this transaction. It's only that we have to protect ourselves—you know how it is.'

'I know exactly how it is,' the Middleton assured him, but sat down again.

'Now,' said Angusson, sitting opposite him and taking up a pen. 'Let's have all the details.'

§

In the Strand is a fascinating shop where you can get any hue of shirt for four and nine, with two collars, and farther along is another fascinating shop where you can get very smart shoes for twelve and six, and with a little more exploration you can find ties for one and six that look silk and socks with clocks on them for one and nine. A pound of the week's allowance went into the various tills of these fascinating shops, and another four and six to the dry-cleaners over the blue serge suit, and Robin dressed for lunch was fine to look upon. When he went downstairs to show himself to Diana he passed Mrs. Wallace on the stairs and was cut dead, as Mrs. Wallace failed to recognize him and never spoke to strangers, and Diana was enormously impressed and straightened his tie and arranged the handkerchief in his pocket to better advantage, and brushed invisible fluff off his shoulders and kissed him and told him she had never seen any one

look nicer, and he asked her rather anxiously if Middleton would notice that the blue serge suit had come from a Thirty Shilling Tailor, and was assured that it couldn't look more expensive or exclusive if it had come from Savile Row or Moss Bros., and just as they were about to leave, Diana asked him if he had the play, and he had to do rushing back upstairs to get it, having forgotten about it completely, and passed Mrs. Wallace again, who recognized him this time and said 'My word!'

They arrived in Charing Cross Road at a quarter-past one, and walked up and down the second-hand bookshops for ten minutes, and then walked very slowly round the block past Leicester Square Tube Station and up St. Martin's Lane and past the St. Martin's Theatre, and arrived at the Ivy on the very tick of one-thirty and asked for Mr. Bannock, which made no impression and covered them with confusion, and then asked for Mr. Middleton and were at once shown to a table in the middle of the room and told that Mr. Middleton would be along very soon and had sent a message asking them to have a drink while they were waiting.

They refused the drink and tried to look quite at ease, as if they came to the Ivy as a matter of habit, but Robin felt that word had got round that his socks had cost one and nine and his tie only *looked* silk, and people were eyeing him up and down contemptuously.

In a whisper so soft that he had the greatest difficulty in catching its import, Diana brought his attention to A. P. Herbert, who was lunching by himself two tables away and reading a small book propped against the cruet. They watched Mr. Herbert eating with rapt fascination, until he looked up and caught them at it, when they dropped their eyes to the table-cloth and were quite overcome with embarrassment and didn't dare look round for any other celebrities for three minutes or more. At the table next to them sat an actress who had had a first night the night before, and had come to the Ivy with an admiring companion expressly to receive praise.

Her friends, as they came in, sprang into a sudden

scamper, descended on her and kissed her extravagantly, though only on one cheek, and gave tongue lusciously. 'My *darling!*' they said. 'Isn't it wonderful? But *what* a success! I saw the notices—perfectly marvellous! I hear you were simply wonderful, darling—*every one's* saying so! You *must* be feeling pleased about it! Congratulations, darling!'

And after they had said it again, sometimes twice and three times, and had gone away, another friend would come in, and pick up where they left off.

'My *darling!*' they said. 'Isn't it wonderful? But *what* a success! I saw the notices—perfectly marvellous! I hear you were simply wonderful, darling—*every one's* saying so!'

Diana and Robin had been listening to it for over fifteen minutes before Garstin arrived.

'Hullo, hullo, hullo!' he said brightly as he drew near. 'Waiting long?'

The actress, who had looked up expectantly with a nice smile under the impression that Garstin was talking to her and that she had met him somewhere and forgotten, went back to her escalope of veal with a vague twitch of annoyance. Garstin drew out a chair and sat down, rubbing his hands like Meadowsweet about to commit a contract. 'Middleton not come yet?' he inquired unnecessarily. 'Lazy lout. Let's start on something. No, perhaps better not. The gross creature with his feet in his soup over there is one of the big noises at Twickenham. If you went over to him and said: "Hullo, you here to lunch?" he'd tell you, no, he was talent-scouting. You watch. He'll smoke a green cigar in between the courses, and others in the vicinity will retire sick. That's Lilian Laze two tables away. I'd take you over and introduce you, only I don't know her. And that's Dorothy Hyson just come in with Robert Douglas. Perfect, ain't she? Hey, waiter, bring the wine list, will you?' He lowered his voice and told them who the actress was who had just had the first night, though they knew. 'She was lousy,' he added. 'I was there. They won't run a fortnight.

Lucky she doesn't know who I am. I gave her the bird in my paper.' The actress heard all this (which was what Garstin intended) and later studied him carefully while purporting to call a waiter, and received a formal bow of recognition from him which confused her a whit, though she made a mental photograph of his face and resolved to speak to her management and have something done about it.

The waiter brought the wine-list and Garstin ordered three beers, which infuriated the waiter, though he showed none of it, and the big noise from Twickenham lit his green cigar and began flapping his napkin for attention.

Garstin had been a little taken aback to find Diana present, for the post card to Robin, though ambiguous, had meant him to come alone (not that Garstin wasn't very pleased to see Diana from a selfish point of view—he was; very) but the Middleton didn't expect her and would fail to be pleased, and Garstin was anxious that everything should develop smoothly according to plan.

'Got the play all right?' he asked, for something to say, and Robin held it up for a second to show him he had. 'Swell. If we don't talk him into wanting it may I never dream again. Have a good time down at Ada's after I left? Bet you did. Looking smart very, both of you. Do me great credit.'

The beers arrived, and two more friends told the actress at the next table how marvellous she had been the night before, and no one would have dreamed that there was misgiving in Garstin's soul. The Ivy had filled up and was busy with chatter and celebrities nodding and bowing to one another and recognizing inferiors in the grand manner, and the actress at the next table was working overtime, and almost as if he had waited until it had reached its peak, the Middleton appeared with Agatha Penn and threaded his way carefully through the tables.

'Half an hour late,' he said as Robin rose, 'and no excuse. I'm desperately sorry. How do you do,

Mr. Gardner! You remember Miss Penn, don't you? I really *am* stricken with shame for keeping you waiting so long!

His eye fell on Diana, and only Garstin noted the flicker in it.

'This is Miss Shand,' said Robin. 'Mr. Middleton, Miss Penn.'

'How do you do!' said the Middleton effusively. 'But how absolutely charming it was of you to come! I'm so glad Garstin got a message right for once in his life!' They all settled themselves and a waiter appeared with menus. 'You've written a great play, haven't you, Mr. Gardner? So Garstin tells me, anyway. I hope you'll let me read it some time. I've been looking for one long enough, God knows, haven't I, Penny?'

'Yeah,' said Agatha Penn non-committally.

'I've told you,' Garstin announced, 'that this one'll fit you like a glove, and you'll think so too when you've seen it.'

'Well, suppose we wait till I've read it before we discuss it,' the Middleton suggested easily, 'and concentrate on food for the moment? I have a yawning void.'

It was quite the most delightful lunch, with flowing wit and pleasantries and excellent showmanship on the part of the Middleton, and by the end of it Robin was the Middleton's to command, fully satisfied now that he had never met such a fine gentleman.

Agatha Penn devoted herself to Diana. She had a rough idea of the shape of things to come, and her warm heart went out to Diana, whom she liked and pitied with great sincerity, though nothing would have induced her to warn her while there was still time. This was not evil on the part of Miss Penn, but the clear knowledge that if Diana tore the play to shreds and hid Robin from the Middleton's prying eye, the Middleton would know whom to thank for it, and would cut adrift from her without so much as a word of farewell; and this Miss Penn would not have been able to bear.

Curiously enough, without the help of experienced

advice, Diana had felt a vague mistrust stir within her the moment the Middleton had opened his mouth, and as the lunch progressed the mistrust progressed too, until it was a firm suspicion too strong to argue away as a prejudice. She realized with an unhappy conscience that any one who might help Robin's play was at least entitled to her appreciation and gratitude, but even so could feel none for the Middleton. When she looked at him it gave her a heavy feeling of foreboding. He seemed to make his witty sallies and flattering remarks automatically, like a wax fortune-teller in a glass box on a pier, and under cover of it was thinking quite differently about other things — unpleasant things — and planning what he was going to do. Her mind suddenly flew back and connected up with the incident in the Bannocks' house when she had heard the Rev. Sharman tell him what time the train left in the morning, and for the first time realized why the Rev. Sharman had made him catch the train, and why Garstin had been whipped.

To Robin the lunch was over in a flash, to Diana it dragged interminably. At the end the Middleton took the script and said he would let Robin know what he thought of it the moment he had time to read it, and Robin thanked him for taking the play, and for the lunch, and for the trouble he had gone to over both, and away went the Middleton and Miss Penn in a taxi, and away went Garstin to the office in Fleet Street, and back to I-bury Street went Robin and Diana.

'Do you think he'll take it?' Robin asked, obviously racked with suspense, as they settled into the bus. 'I don't, for a moment.'

'I do,' said Diana, though not as cheerfully as she might have. 'I'm quite certain of it.'

This was good enough for Robin, and he bounced on the seat with excitement. 'Gosh, wouldn't it be marvellous?' he asked. 'Isn't he a grand person, Diana? Didn't you think he was grand?'

'Yes,' said Diana, but only because Robin wanted it.

He looked at her quickly, and some of his excitement fell away.

'Are you sure?' he pursued, taking her hand in his.

Diana looked up at him, and wondered whether to reassure him or to say what she thought, and then decided that she had no right to criticize the Middleton and was probably quite wrong, and squeezed his hand and said, 'Of course I am!' but Robin had seen that she wasn't and still looked serious.

'If you don't like him I'll get the play back and say I made a mistake,' he offered, and meant it, and Diana was so moved that she nearly cried openly on the bus.

'Of course I meant it, Robin!' she said earnestly; 'and you're not to think of doing anything so silly! I'd never forgive you!'

'Well, anyway,' said Robin reassuringly, 'he probably won't like it.'

Diana found herself wishing desperately that he wouldn't, but still had the terrible certainty that it had been arranged all along that the Middleton would do *Soft Laughter*, and was Fate, and couldn't be interfered with.

When they got back from the Studio the next day Robin paused at the green baize board hopefully, but there was nothing (except that the Insurance Company had written to him again) and Miss Abernethy swore there hadn't been any telephone messages. The post next morning was unfruitful, and again in the evening. At the end of a week Robin began to feel that it was all up with *Soft Laughter*, and that the Middleton thought it so bad that he couldn't bring himself to write and explain. Diana did her best to cheer him by suggesting, in quick rotation, that Middleton was terribly busy and hadn't time to write; that he liked the play, but was getting expert advice on it; that he had mislaid the play and had only just found it again; that his letter had been lost in the post and that he would write again; and eventually (after two weeks had gone by) that it was all for the best, and he wasn't to be unhappy about it.

Even Garstin made no sound nor uttered cry. For

a fortnight he too lay hid. This was by strict command of the Middleton, who knew his job, and the rooms in Ebury Street were hushed and life seemed very flat, though Robin did his best to show Diana how little he actually cared, and what a bagatelle it was to have one's play treated like a Blackshirt newspaper.

Miss Abernethy, aware that a shadow had descended on the apples of her eye, did her best to comfort with a kindly word and slices of currant pie and a cup of tea every now and again when they came home late and she happened to be about, and often paused in her duties about the house to discuss the early struggles of the now famous.

To a certain extent Miss Abernethy succeeded in making life brighter than it would have been otherwise, though no one could have healed the deep wound in Robin's heart or dried the figurative tears he shed for the silenced *Soft Laughter* (for, he argued, if the Middleton didn't want it, not another soul would) and only Diana made up for the emptiness it gave him.

At their darkest hour Christopher Lovell arrived about half-past eight in the evening with three large bottles of beer. He was producing a Sunday Night play that people thought might be bought for the West End, and had come to celebrate. They received him joyfully and made a great show of celebration, being pleased that his luck was so definitely changing for the better, and drank the beer willingly; but Christopher Lovell detected in a short time that things were amiss, and asked what things, and could he help? With a little diffidence and some slight hesitation Diana and Robin told him about the crashed hopes of *Soft Laughter*. Christopher at once brought home to them how short a time Middleton had had it in comparison to some he could mention (and did), and assured them that it was early by months to give up hope. He added that if the Middleton *did* send it back with a polite excuse, he could persuade his Sunday Night people to read it and give it a try-out if it was as good as it sounded, in which case he would produce it, and there wasn't any reason why

they couldn't play in it—not the leads, of course, but smaller parts—which would give them an enormous kick and do no harm to any one. They were unable to thank him enough.

Things were as they were again.

But hush, hark! That sound you hear is the *Bremen* having words with a Belfast freighter as it makes for its berth, with Nemesis aboard in the shape of Lottie Osgood, known to the passengers as Lottie the Skegness Bumboat Woman.

The net tightens.

When at last Christopher Lovell took himself home, after repeated exhortations to them to keep as cheerful as they were when he left them, they found that the last post had brought a letter from the Middleton.

'Dear Gardner,' it ran. 'Sorry to have kept you waiting all this time. I think the play is excellent, but I should like to see you personally about it. Will you lunch with me to-morrow at the Berkeley at one-thirty? Ring me if you can't, otherwise I shall expect you.'

'With best wishes, Douglas Middleton.'

That night Diana lay awake, wondering why she was so frightened. She tried hard to think that it was only her imagination, and that actually the Middleton was only interested in getting himself a good play, but something inside kept insisting that the Middleton was dangerous and evil, and that something terrible was going to happen.

She lay gazing at the fire-place, which was lit from a street-lamp outside, and then a tear trickled down her cheek and on to the pillow. With sudden impulse she climbed out of bed and knelt down beside it.

'Please, God, look after him,' she said. 'Please, God, don't let them hurt him!' and then felt a little happier about it and got back to bed, and just as she was on the verge of going off to sleep, suddenly burst into tears, and cried into the pillow in case she woke up Number Ten

§

When Robin asked for the Middleton at the Berkeley they at once took him to the lounge, and there the Middleton filled him with gin and vermouth and made him slightly hazy, and then took him in to lunch and began business over prawn cocktails.

'I'm going to be completely frank with you,' he announced with great honesty. 'I like your play terrifically, Gardner, and of course the part's a gift to any emotional actor. It's well written, and it's moving. I haven't any doubts about the success I could make in it; let's face it. I know what I can do and what I can't do. What'll you have to follow that? Mushroom omelette? Two, waiter. The only thing standing in my way at present is that I've only a limited amount of capital, and if I took the responsibility of a production on to my own shoulders I'd be broke to the wide if it flopped—and after all, *any* play can flop just as easily as it can run—you can't predict these things. Don't get alarmed; I'm not going to ask you to find backing for it—I don't consider the playwright should do any more than turn out a good play—it's simply that I shall need your help if you want to see the play produced as much as I do—and I feel quite sure you do.'

Robin assured him earnestly how much he did, and how willing he was to help in any way possible.

'Now,' the Middleton proceeded, 'there are a lot of things I could do with this play. I could send it the rounds of the managers. The points against it are that they'd take years reading it and probably wouldn't see anything in it, not knowing your name; and that even if you did place it eventually, you might find that they'd have a heap of conditions attached that you wouldn't like. Second, we could get a Sunday Night Society to do it. There's always an element of risk there, though. People drop out of the cast at the last minute, and you run the danger of having your play under-rehearsed, which does more damage than good.'

'The third, and I think best thing to do is to find backing—about two thousand pounds. That'd give you a good cast, a decent theatre, and enough left over to keep your theatre open if it didn't catch on at once. Now, backing isn't easy to find. Most people with money to put in the theatre have been fleeced so badly that they're not anxious to try it twice; but I've got some one in mind who could afford two thousand and not know it was missing if we flopped—an American woman called Osgood, and she's on her way over here at the moment. I don't want you to get any wrong ideas of her—she's a silly old cow with flashes of intelligence, and she knows a good deal about the theatre—from the outside—and is rather fond of me as an actor, but apart from that I can't guarantee anything.

'I'm going to introduce you to her, and if she likes you well enough—and the play—to put up the money, I'll put you in touch with a decent management who'll produce it. I'm doing this because I want to play the part, Gardner; but it won't do any one any good if I sit holding the reins and giving directions. I want to stay in the background until everything's been arranged satisfactorily, and then come forward simply and solely as an actor engaged to play in the production. You do appreciate that, don't you?'

Robin said how completely he did and how terribly decent it was of him to take the trouble, and thought how inadequate his thanks sounded.

'I don't mind telling you, quite incidentally, that I think you're going to be a very great playwright one day,' the Middleton added, causing Robin's brain to swim. 'When you're older and more experienced and don't have to go to the conventions for your material—you know what I mean—when you can tap life itself and not take it second-hand as you naturally have to now. So you see, it's in my interests as an actor to do what I can for you while you need helping.' He laughed charmingly. 'Then one day I'll be able to come and beg for character parts when you're the new Somerset Maugham.'

Here a page-boy quivered into view and thrust a salver under his nose.

'Mr. Middleton?' he gave voice, as one unmasking a super-criminal. 'Wanted on the 'phone.'

'Excuse me, will you?' asked the Middleton, rising. 'I won't be a moment.'

Robin rose politely and sat again as Douglas sped off in the wake of the page-boy to grapple with this new development. One day, had said the Middleton, he would be a great playwright. No—a *very* great playwright—the new Somerset Maugham. With great deliberation, to steady his nerves, he read the *à la carte* right through (knowing no French) and found himself committing to memory, as one learning a trade, the more intriguing dishes.

The page-boy allotted the Middleton a small glass box with an extension in it, and departed thumbing his tip meditatively.

'Hullo?' said the Middleton, closeted. 'Douglas Middleton here.'

'You're telling *me*?' came back with ear-splitting enthusiasm. 'Take three guesses who's hit Lunnon? Couldn't do it? It's Lottie! How ya, Doug, ya stooge? Come away round before I fall panting to the mat! Say, am I crazy to see you again? Don't answer! I am! Only been here an hour, and it feels like yeers! What you been doing since you got back? Say, don't shipboard make you feel sick? Does me! Why don't you say something—have I struck ya dumb? Say, come on around, Doug, and quit stalling! I'm crazy to see ya!'

'Hullo, Lottie,' said the Middleton in an orderly manner. 'I didn't know you'd arrive so early. I'm in the middle of lunch at the moment. I'll come straight on.'

'Come on round now!' Lottie beseeched. 'I'll give ya another lunch! Another two lunches!'

'I'm lunching with a friend,' the Middleton pointed out.

'That's O.K.—bring the friend! Ah, gee, Doug, quit being a meanie! Come on along!'

'All right,' said the Middleton peaceably. 'Where are you?'

'Right across the road. I give ya five minutes, and then I'll send out a posse!'

'The Ritz?' asked the Middleton unnecessarily.

'Well, o' course the Ritz! What did ya think I meant? The Green Park "*Ladies*"?'

'Be right along,' said the Middleton and rang off. 'Phew!' He opened the door and breathed deeply, and then went to collect Robin.

'I'm afraid,' he said pleasantly, 'that we're going to have an interrupted lunch. The 'phone call was Lottie Osgood. She wants us to go over straightaway.' He called the waiter and begged a bill. 'Now don't forget. Never let her out of your sight until she's made up her mind one way or the other. If she goes to China go along as well—she'll pay your passage—but don't let her out of your sight! It ought to be child's play,' he added encouragingly.

'But I've never done anything like this before!' Robin explained in anguish. 'How do I start?'

'I'll start you,' the Middleton gave promise. 'And tell you where to carry on.' He gave the waiter a note and made for the door. 'It's a pity we can't stop to light a joss-stick to the Bramah of Drama,' he threw over his shoulder; 'but if you want your play to live and breathe, pray as you never prayed before.'

They braved the traffic in Piccadilly and forced the portals of the Ritz. In the lift on the way to the Osgood suite Robin's heart began hammering wildly against his ribs with nervousness. Like Peter Pan exhorting a matinee to clap its hands if it believed in fairies, he sent out a telepathic S O S to Diana for moral support, and wished so desperately that she was near him that he got out at the wrong door and had to be salvaged from under the very feet of two Armenian bankers by the Middleton.

A maid took them over, on the right floor, and let them into a baroque ante-room, promising faithfully that Mrs. Osgood would be with them before they knew

it. The room was clustered with flowers. They were not particularly beautiful flowers, but they were all out of season and their cash equivalent would have kept a small war in gas-bombs a fortnight, and they smelt exotic. The Middleton lit a cigarette and laid himself down upon an arm-chair and all but disappeared in plush, and Robin fidgeted with his hat and looked out of the window at the bodies lying locked together on the grass in Green Park; which is how the oppressed classes take their fun, and disconcerts the sheep. (You knew there were sheep in Green Park?)

'Try,' said the Middleton gently, 'to take off some of that shyness. Nobody'll take a mean advantage of it. You're about the shyest young blighter I've ever talked business with.'

'I'm sorry,' said Robin, colouring immediately. 'I'll do what I can.'

There were rumblings from the inner chamber, and then the doors were flung back and presto! Lottie.

'Doug Middleton!' she cried loudly, and swept down on him like a punctured balloon from the stratosphere. The Middleton rose neatly, sidestepped a stranglehold by the skin of his teeth, greeted her cordially but conventionally, and presented Robin.

'Oh, my!' said Lottie, falling back a step in wonder. 'But isn't he cute! I must have him for a stooge! I must! Not another word! Sit down and tell me who you are and all about yourself! Doug, ring the bell, will ya? You must think me awful for dragging you away from your lunch, Mr. Gardner, but the fact is, I was so excited — arriving in dear old England! — that I couldn't wait a moment to see Doug again! Doug, did you press that bell or just trifle with it?'

'It rang,' said the Middleton reassuringly.

'Well, come and sit down and tell me what you've been doing since you left us! Would you believe; I had three weeks in Hollywood just before I gart your cable! Met Clark Gable! Such a stooge! And

Lubitsch! Do *you* know, Lubitsch told me I was practically the most intelligent woman he had *ever* talked to? He *did*!' A menial appeared at the door, and she bounced round on him. 'What is it?' she demanded. 'Who are you? Did you knock? Not another word. You didn't!'

'You rang, madam,' said the menial, who had known so many Lottie Osgoods that it no longer rankled.

'Oh yes!' said Lottie. 'Bring champagne, waiter! Larts and larts of champagne!'

'Yes, madam,' said the menial, speaking unhurriedly, and as if a dead nobleman were lying in state upstairs. 'What brand, madam?'

'What?' asked Lottie swiftly, as one scenting insolence.

'What brand, madam?'

'Oh, any!' said Lottie. 'Provided it's *good*! I don't care how expensive it is, provided it's *good*—you understand, waiter?'

'A magnum, madam?'

'No. Three!' said Lottie. 'And I want them all at once!'

'Very good, madam,' said the menial, and felt it was almost worth his job to bring her flat ginger ale, just to see if she could tell the difference.

'Why three?' inquired the Middleton when the menial had gone. 'One each?'

'Well, even if we don't drink 'em all,' Lottie explained, 'I like to hear the corks *parp*! Doug, have you still got that Penn dame hanging around?'

'She's in London,' said the Middleton discreetly.

'Well, let's hope it's big enough for us both,' said Lottie fervently, 'after what she called me that time, remember?'

'All in fun,' the Middleton assured her.

'Fun my Annic Rooney!' said Lottie warmly. 'What do you do, Mr. Gardner?'

'He's a playwright,' said the Middleton.

'No?' exclaimed Lottie. 'A real one? A playwright? But how swell! But how wonderful! Gee,

if one thing gives me a bigger kick than another, it's meeting a playwright! What have ya done?'

'He's just had his third play come off after a nine months' run,' said the Middleton, 'and he's written another. That's what we were talking about over our lunch. I think you ought to get him to read it to you, Lottie. I was just telling him coming over that you had an extraordinary flair for spotting a good play when you heard it.'

'Why, I'd *love* to have him read it me!' said Lottie richly. 'Just love it! You wouldn't know, Mr. Gardner, but I've been an actress myself—way back now; but I've never lost my touch with the theatre, have I, Doug? I have not! Why, Mr. Gardner, I had my own company once; can you imagine that? I ran it, produced the plays, played the leads, and played in every big theatre in the States! I remember once last fall, when Ben and Charlie were over to dinner—that's Hecht and MacArthur—maybe you know them?—and we were talking about the theatre, and suddenly Ben gets up at the table and lifts his glass and says, "Mrs. Osgood, you are not a member of the theatrical profession—you *are* the Theatre!" Can you imagine that?'

'I didn't know you knew them,' said the Middleton in polite wonder.

'No?' asked Lottie crisply. 'Dya think I'd call big guys like that by their first names if I didn't know them as well as I know you and Aimée Semple Macpherson? I'll tell you something else too, Mr. Gardner! I have a cravat belonging to the late Rudolph Valentino and a bust of Ella Wheeler Wilcox! I'm only telling you this, because I don't want you to think I'm just an enthusiastic amateur! I've loved the theatre all my life, passionately—I've lived for it, suffered for it! It's *not* just a flair like Doug says! My *soul* is in the theatre! When I was still a child, Mr. Gardner, not more'n fourteen—'

'That's why I thought you ought to meet him and read his play,' the Middleton broke in, though tactfully; 'it's the sort of stuff you'd understand—'

'When I was still a child,' said Lottie in a louder key, 'not more'n fourteen, I knoo Juliet—the whole part! And don't run away with the idea I don't know my London theatre just because I live in Noo York! I say, there're only three producers in London—John Gielgud, Tyron Guthrie and Lubitsch—and there again Lubitsch is in Hollywood, not London, which leaves two, and if that isn't just turrible, two producers in London—*two!*—in *London!*—I'd like to know what *is*, that's all! Doug, you haven't told me what you bin doing with yourself since you left Noo York! Hiding sumptin? Not another word! You are! Oh, and Doug, the Moxor Hotel 'phoned me from Paris, and they can give me the same suite I had way back in 1930! Isn't it cute? They remembered me! I wondered how they heard I was back in Yurrupe? I'm just crazy to see Paris again!'

Here the champagne arrived, and there was an interval for refreshments, and then Lottie, in the middle of a sip, suddenly spun round (splashing the menial in passing) and shot out her arm. 'Doug!' she gave blast. 'Come to Paris with me—and you too, Mr. Gardner!'

'Don't be absurd, Lottie,' said the Middleton, 'it's impossible. We're both busy people. I've got my job to look to, and Robin's got a play to be given production.'

'Come to Paris,' said Lottie forcefully, 'and I'll put the play on when I get back! Can I say fairer?'

'You haven't read the play,' said the Middleton sharply. 'What nonsense you talk sometimes, Lottie!'

Lottie shook with magnificent impatience. 'I know the play Mr. Gardner's written as well as if I'd seen it produced, just by looking at him! I don't need any convincing, Doug Middleton! I make my mind up like *tha*!' She snapped her fingers together with a small detonation. 'And I'm never wrong! You'll come, Mr. Gardner?—as my guest? Not another word! You will! That's settled! And just you try to back out of it, Doug! Waiter, where's my maid? Call my maid! I'm going to 'phone for reservations now, and

we'll fly over to-morrow! Eloise! Eloise!' And she went back through the double doors to her inner sanctum like a windjammer spanking down a west wind.

Stunned and aghast, Robin turned to the Middleton.

'Did she mean all that?' he asked uncertainly.

The Middleton nodded sympathetically.

'It can't be helped, old man. You'll have to go—if you want a production, that is. It'll only be for about a week, and you'll be at the Moxor, which is comfortable living.'

'But I *can't* go to Paris like that!' said Robin in distress. 'What could I tell people?'

'Nothing,' said the Middleton. 'Just vanish for a week. After all, you won't be in any danger. I'll be there too.'

Things brightened a little, but were still fraught with impossibility.

'But *really* I can't go, Mr. Middleton!' said Robin earnestly.

'If you let her out of your sight for a week,' the Middleton said warningly, 'you'll never see *Soft Laughter* reach a theatre for years. It's worth it, Gardner. You can take my word, you won't be sorry if you go. I know Lottie. I tell you what; think it over and ring me up this evening—only don't tell any one else about it. They'll only put the obvious construction on it, and it wouldn't do you any good trying to persuade them it was all above board.'

'You're *sure* I ought to go?' asked Robin, after a pause, putting his trust in the Middleton.

'Yes,' said the Middleton.

'Then I will,' said Robin, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

CHAPTER X

*'What matters it how far we go?' his scaly friend replied;
There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The further off from England, the nearer is to France—
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the
dance!'*

'WHEN I do a thing,' Lottie was wont to say, 'I do it because it happens to please *me*! When I spend money, I spend it to amuse *myself*! I pay what I think a thing's worth, not what any one else thinks it's worth! I know what I want, what's more, and *get* it! I have never wanted anything and not got it, and the suckers who think they can take something off me for nothing are doo for a big horse-laugh!'

'But what is she *like*?' asked Diana, heavy hearted, when Robin had given her a vivid description of all that had come to pass. 'Is she horrid or just silly, like she sounds?'

'I think she's silly,' said Robin. 'But you can't really tell from the way she talks, although she doesn't talk sense. You get the feeling that she's only talking like that because she knows she can say anything and get away with it because of having so much money, and no one'd dare tell her she's talking nonsense. She looks funny, Diana. Terribly fat and big, and terribly done up; and she tries to do graceful things like a ballet dancer when she moves about, and it makes you want to laugh, except that she's so serious about it. You get the feeling that she thinks she's young and slim and graceful. I suppose that's really pathetic and not funny, though. And on the other hand, she can be quite witty, suddenly, when you don't expect it, and say very intelligent things without having to think them out. And she seems very sincere about the theatre. I believe that if she had the chance she'd be quite human and decent. But I don't want to go to Paris with her. I thought at first it was

just a sort of whim which she'd have forgotten about ten minutes later, but it wasn't. She booked a suite at the Moxor Hotel by telephone — it's a *terribly* expensive hotel, Diana!—and the seats on the Air Mail while we were still there, and it's the day after to-morrow.'

He settled himself on the floor and rested his arms in her lap and gazed up at her with a worried brow. 'Middleton said it'd be a week. Diana—I couldn't be away from you a whole week.'

He made the discovery as he spoke, and Diana realized that she couldn't be away from Robin a week either.

They gazed at each other's eyes, amazed that separation held such terrors, and Diana, with a sudden instinctive movement, leant forward and held him close to her, and he put his arms round her and held her tightly, and neither of them spoke for a while.

It had come on to rain again, and just outside the door there was a leak in the ceiling that Miss Abernethy had foiled with an enamel basin and a sponge pending the arrival of the plumber; but when the drops fell wide they dodged the sponge and hit the basin with a smack like a 'cello-string snapping, so that the silence was punctuated by an irregular *plink, plonk!* and then a pause (in which the sponge got in some good work) and then *plonk!* and then another pause; which was maddening to Number Thirteen, who was alone and nervy, but hardly worried them at all, because they were sharing it and were facing a crisis.

Now, while Robin was uncertain and a little nervous of Lottie Osgood's inner motives, and wondering if he would be suddenly faced with an embarrassing situation while miles from his native land and with no means of escape (though trusting in the Middleton's assurance that Lottie would give him no trouble), Diana was uncertain and a little nervous of the Middleton's inner motives, in spite of his alibi in Agatha Penn, and mentioned this diffidently; and though Robin was very sensible about it she realized that his opinion of the Middleton was so high that nothing could shake it (short

of the Middleton himself) and she felt a great deal more uncertain and nervous than she had before; because it was looking more and more as if the Middleton had engineered the whole thing, and there was no way of putting Robin on his guard without suggesting that he couldn't pick his friends discriminatingly. She wrote a note to Ada FitzGerald that night, after she had gone back to Number Eleven, without consulting Robin. In it she simply told Ada not to be surprised if people should ask her if Robin was staying with her, and that if she would answer yes, that he was, it would be a very great favour indeed.

Ada sent back a post card. '*Certainly. Is it all a Black Plot? I shall expect to be let into it when the time is meet.*'

The next day the Middleton helped Robin get a passport, which couldn't be supplied in the time at first and was then arranged, and in the evening he dined with Lottic, and though the Middleton tried to make her listen to the plot of the play she waved it aside and said there would be plenty of time when they got back from Paris, and that she knew perfectly well that the play was a pip and was going to do it anyway. Robin was unfortunately out of earshot when she asked the Middleton why in hell he was rushing her off to Paris when she had no sooner recovered balance from setting her foot in London (not that she didn't want to go) and missed also the Middleton's explanation, which, without containing any vivid reasons, appeased Lottic's curiosity without exciting her suspicions, and she was content to let the matter drop, being in a state when pretty nearly everything the Middleton suggested appealed to her as coming from a divine being; and if he wanted her to drag the little Gardner boy off to Paris along with them, it was a very small thing, and she was glad to do it for him.

§

The next morning the Middleton picked up Robin at Ebury Street in a taxi and they drove out, with their

luggage in front with the driver, to the Croydon aerodrome, where they were to meet Lottie and set forth. Robin had never been in an aeroplane in his life, and was wondering how he would like it and feeling a certain amount of misgiving, and was also paralysed by the taximeter (which was ticking up incredible sums) and found himself watching it desperately and feeling a pang of horror every time it went up another threepence, although he wasn't going to pay it. As they went into the Imperial Airways building he suddenly wanted to wait till Lottie came back from Paris and risk her having lost interest in him. But it was too late. She had spied them and was galloping across the floor. And with her was an incredible person in stiff wing collar and a cravat and tails and a woolly fur coat who looked like a floor-walker in a boot shop, except that he wore a monocle, which put him outside the pale of floor-walkers. The Middleton seemed as surprised to see him as Robin, and had obviously never met him before.

'Isn't it wonderful?' blared Lottie. 'Tullio's coming, too! Meet Doug Middleton and Something Gardner—Robin!—Tullio Crespo! Can you beat it, Doug? I haven't seen Tullio since I was here in 'thirty, and last night we ran across each other just like that! Isn't it swell?'

Tullio fixed a moist and puffy eye on Robin and the Middleton, and bowed as if it hurt him.

'Tullio,' explained Lottie, with the enthusiasm of one trying to sell a second-hand car, 'is the most *perfect* dancer I have ever met in three countries, and I'm sure you'll get along fine together! He knows Paris like he was on the Board that laid it out—we first met there—so I'm bringing him along to look after us and take us to all the right places!'

An official told them civilly that if they were thinking of catching the Paris 'plane it was time they did something about it, and speech with the strange Mr. Crespo had to be put off until they had scrambled through the barriers and settled into their seats, and as the 'plane and the bustle all around were of greater interest than

'perfect dancers' Robin took no part in the early skirmishes of polite conversation that the Middleton was waging with Tullio across the table.

When the plane taxied across the field and took the air, he was filled with wild excitement and pleasure, and pressed his nose to the window in ecstasy as the world dwindled away into a silly little thing of no account, and would have given everything he possessed for Diana to have been there to see it too.

§

Now this Paris interlude, as a Paris interlude, is not part of the story proper, so it is not going down in full. They were met at the aerodrome by a red Rolls-Royce, and when they reached the Moxor the entire staff turned out to welcome Lottie with a piece of plush carpet, and they were ushered in with an extravagance that was ordinarily shown only to Royalty, unless in exile.

The Manager himself unlocked the doors and let them into the suite. '*Voilà, madame!*' he said excitedly. 'Ze same suite as before, no? Is it not lucky, yais? So fortunate Monsieur Meedleton let us know in time, so we can resairve it for you, no?'

'Yes, yes!' said Lottie, running once round the room like a fairy. 'Champagne! Anton, make them bring lots and lots of champagne!' She looked round for Tullio and found he was not. 'Where's Tullio?' she demanded at once, suspecting theft.

'Seeing a man about a dog,' said the Middleton.

Lottie waltzed over to the windows and flung them open. 'Ahh!' she cried throatily. 'Paris! Paris! Paris! Look, Doug; the Eiffel Tower!'

'I've seen it on post cards,' said the Middleton lazily, seating himself comfortably on a divan.

Lottie brought her hands together like a paper-bag popping, and then flung them out dramatically. 'Isn't it wonderful being in Paris? Doesn't your whole being swell up like a burd flying out of a cage? This is

freedom! This is peace and quiet and romance—Doug, do go and see if they've had a proper thing put in the bathroom.'

Tullio entered at this moment and gave answer.

'I have,' he said. 'They haven't.'

'Isn't he a lovely stooge, Doug?' Lottie demanded ecstatically. 'It's his eyes! That's the Irish in him!'

'I have no Irish in me,' said Tullio severely. 'I am the son of a Spanish Count, out of wedlock.'

'Nonsense!' said Lottie happily. 'Those eyes are Irish. Peat, pixies, and popery. The Irish.' She blundered against a chair and fell back to eye it. 'This is new,' she said alertly. 'Fake. Oh, Doug!—Tullio!—Robin! I'm so glad I came to Paris!' She twirled on her heel, and did what was clearly intended to be an intricate exhibition waltz across the room.

'*La-la-la! La-la-la! M-m-m-m!*' she sang.

'You'll fall down,' said Tullio unromantically.

'Don't be rude!' cautioned Lottie without rancour, though ceasing the waltz. 'I'm a very good dancer! Wasn't that a lovely chauffeur driving the Rolls that met us? Just a stooge, of course! I'm going to hire that Rolls *just* so he can drive us about all day!'

'Do you know what that Rolls costs a day?' Tullio inquired.

'No! What? About a franc or two!' said Lottie carelessly, to whom it made no odds.

'Three hundred francs. It's on the tariff card. And extra for evenings.'

'Isn't he sweet?' Lottie asked the Middleton. 'Always trying to economize! Still, I don't mind! I must have that chauffeur!'

'I dare say it could be arranged so that you didn't have to pay three hundred francs for his car as well,' the Middleton suggested practically.

'If you're going to be rude,' said Lottie with dignity, 'you can go and live by yourself in a cheap hotel, Doug Middleton! Tullio, put on a record and let's dance!'

Now the really terrible thing about Lottie Osgood

was that she considered her money entitled her to sing every time she heard music, and every time she heard music she sang, and it drowned any orchestra with ease and shook furniture. Tullio stood it well for a few minutes, for he intended banking a few thousand of Lottie's money before his holiday was up; but eventually his eardrums caved in and he switched off the gramophone and suggested a drink at Melody's Bar.

From this they systematically, and doggedly did every bar known to Tullio, dined at Maxim's, and then did the bars again, and even visited the Sphinx in the Montparnasse, which is the bottom. The bars Robin found difficult enough, but the Sphinx hurled him into his first direct contact with naughty ladies, and it made him feel he never wanted to see a naughty lady again for the rest of his life. The Sphinx exists mainly for the entertainment of the more undiscerning tourist, and the naughty ladies are all very matronly and buxom, and somehow give the impression of being helpers at a Village Bazaar who have taken leave of their senses and stripped to the waist. One is supposed to dance at the Sphinx, but somehow one doesn't, which leaves the naughty ladies feeling a little aimless. To combat this they dance together, to a panatrophe, and appear not to be bored by it, which is no small feat. The whole thing left Robin so cold that he began to feel ashamed of himself for not even feeling shocked. Fortunately, the Middleton seemed equally indifferent to it all, so he was able to draw solace from the fact that he was not alone. From there they went to the Folies-Bergère, and then on again. Like most overrich people, Lottie was haunted with a fear, wherever she was, that she was missing something better somewhere else; she could never stay in any one place more than half an hour at a stretch without champing like a restless war-elephant, and never wanted to go home.

On these lines the evening dragged on, till Robin had all but dislocated his jaw trying to conceal his yawns and was heavy with sleep. Dragged in their wake he saw everything Paris had to offer her visitors, and drank

lemon syrups while the others mixed champagne cocktails with gin and ginger ale and whisky, and at last he and the Middleton were the only ones sober. Lottie drunk was frightening, for it never showed anywhere, except in her eyes, which went blank and glassy, and she argued fiercely with everything any one said, and grew more and more energetic and inexhaustible. Robin could hardly believe his good fortune when, at last, he found the Middleton was helping him along the corridor of the Moxor Hotel. The Middleton had developed a new solicitude for him during the evening, which had taken the form of such things as friendly pats on the back and a helping hand getting in and out of taxis, and he had felt very grateful to the Middleton and always kept near him.

As he was settling into bed and reaching to turn out the light, there was a knock on the door. He had a fleeting fear that it might be Lottie, but remembered that Tullio was the favourite of the moment, and then the door opened and the Middleton came in in his pyjamas and dressing-gown to wish him good night. He sat on the bed for a minute or two to discuss the evening and sympathize with Robin, and express relief that Tullio was earning all their keeps, and then unexpectedly leant right forward until his face was within a few inches of Robin's and gazed at him fixedly, and it suddenly occurred to Robin with shattering clarity that the Middleton was queer and was going to kiss him.

Shock, disillusion, incredulity, and disgust struggled within him for first place, and he slid his head away and felt sick. As soon as he moved the Middleton leant back again as if nothing were wrong, but he was breathing unevenly and had gone white. He was angry with himself for trying to work too swiftly, and the guarded defence in Robin's eyes showed him clearly that he had burned his boats behind him.

He rose, with his back to Robin, and stood without moving for a minute. ¹ Then he turned and smiled and said 'Good night' in a perfectly ordinary voice and went out.

§

The 'phone beside his bed roused Robin at seven the next morning. He lifted it off hazily and murmured a weak 'Hullo!'

'Come'n have breakfast with me!' said Lottie's lusty voice, 'and bring the play and read it to me! Did ya sleep well! I've ordered the breakfast and it's arn its way, so come *right* along!' and rang off.

Robin climbed wearily out of bed and padded into the bathroom and turned on a hot bath. Then he brushed his teeth and shaved, and had the bath and dressed, and reported to Lottie with the play under his arm.

She lay propped up in a large Napoleonic double bed, in a nifty little *peignoir*, smoking a cigarette and reading the morning paper.

'Morning, Robin!' she said in welcome. 'Come'n sit on the bed. How d'ya feel?'

'Very tired,' Robin admitted.

'Well, let's get on the breakfast and then tark!' suggested Lottie, and fell upon a roll like a hungry dinosaur. 'Pour the carfee, will ya?'

Robin poured out the coffee and buttered himself a roll, but he had no hunger worth speaking of and nibbled it wanly. Lottie suddenly put down her coffee cup with a deafening clatter and fixed a firm eye on him.

'What's wrang, Robin Gardner?' she demanded, 'and don't say nix! Something's got under your skin! What? The way we persood Nature last night?'

'No, Mrs. Osgood,' said Robin quickly.

'Then what? Spill it!'

And Robin unaccountably and almost without realizing it made a confidante of Lottie Osgood. In a sudden rush she learned who he was, that *Soft Laughter* was his first play, that the Middleton had made him come to Paris when he hadn't wanted to, and what had happened the night before.

'Lord sakes!' said Lottie, amazed. 'Doug Middleton queer! I don't believe it! Yes, I do! Gee, you

poor kid! If I'd known you was on the level I wouldn't have dragged you round the hot spots last night! I guess you reckon I'm pretty lousy? I guess you're right; I am; but there's one thing I never liked, and that was a purvurt making a pass at a decent kid, and it still goes! You lark your door to-night, son, and if he gets in through the fan-light 'phone me, and 'I'll come round with a gun! Say, it's a shaker! Doug Middleton! I'll never believe in any one again! Not that I evur did! Did you know this little jaunt was all his idea? I gart a letter at Southampton sayin' we was to come on here as soon as I could make it and not to ask why. I gucss I don't have to! Gee, that guy needs a small surgical arperation!'

This new slant on Lottie Osgood took Robin off his balance, but it took Lottie off hers as well, for she would have been the last person to suspect a dormant maternal instinct in her cosmic make-up. While surprised she was also a little pleased, for the sensation was refreshingly new. Moreover, a young man being honest with her was nearly as refreshingly new as the maternal instinct.

Robin's first misgiving and regret at having blurted out his woes faded a little when he found Lottie a friend—for at the moment he was in desperate need of friendliness from any one—but he sat back, ashamed, and said: 'I didn't really mean to tell you. I wouldn't have, ordinarily.'

'Think nothing of it,' Lottie assured him. 'People have told me a lart stranger things than that before now!' She lit a cigarette and settled herself more comfortably. 'Look, son, I said I'd put up the money for your play on account of Doug being so enthusiastic about it, and me having a high opinion of his taste in plays—but I guess that's all washed out now I got the idea of his moitive. If you'd dramatized the Telephone Directory he'd still have told me it was a swell play! Read it me. Now.'

So Robin read it to her. She interrupted now and again, and sometimes had to have a point explained to

her—but at the end she sat upright in bed and slapped the eiderdown enthusiastically.

'Why, it's genius!' she said extravagantly. 'Genius! I bet Douglas doesn't realize the half of it! The charm! The style! The drama! The comedy! It's genius! It's gart to go on! It's gotta be as good as money can make it! Say no more, son! That play's going on!'

And then Tullio appeared in a bright dressing-gown of large white polka dots on orange art silk, and shot Robin a glance of contempt when Lottie trumpeted how good his play was and that she was going to see it produced, and later he took Robin aside alone and said, 'I wouldn't put much store by Widow Twankey's promises. She's got a habit of forgetting she made them. If I were you I'd leave her alone, Gardner. Leave her to people like us. She's our legitimate occupation, and we know how to work her. It's just a friendly word of warning,' and then stalked moodily away before Robin had time to answer; not that he could have thought of anything to say.

The Middleton appeared just before lunch, looking as fresh and rested as if he had stayed home the night before with a good book, and greeted Robin pleasantly as if nothing were amiss.

Robin was only too glad to clutch at the hope that the Middleton, having made an unwise move, was going to let the matter drop and behave as if nothing had happened the night before; and the Middleton, wise as he was, mistook Robin's civility for encouragement, and decided that he hadn't acted so hastily as he had thought after all; and at complete cross-purposes they sat down to lunch.

Lottie said nothing to the Middleton concerning Robin's confidence. It made no difference to her feelings for him, and she considered on reflection that if he wanted a side-line it was his own affair and nothing to do with her; but she told him about having the play read to her and her firm resolve to get behind it and push, and the Middleton at last heard the particular note in

Lottie's voice which showed she meant it and which he had been waiting for, and felt his plans were developing as healthily as he could wish.

That night they dined at Maxim's again, but Robin was allowed to come home to the hotel afterwards while the others went on with their pursuit of happiness. He wrote a long letter to Diana (without touching on the trouble with the Middleton for fear of worrying her) and then went to bed. He locked his door on Lottie's advice, and then felt foolish and rather like an old maid anticipating a man with glaring eyes, and unlocked it again and fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow.

At three-twenty Lottie returned, and as soon as Tullio had reported for duty the Middleton went to Robin's door and came in without knocking.

Robin was only half awake when he switched the light on and sat on the side of the bed, so he shook him playfully. Robin slid up to a half-sitting position and gazed at him questioningly, deeply regretting not having locked the door, and then quite unexpectedly the Middleton's careful reserve scattered before his impetuosity and he flung himself on Robin, gripping him fiercely.

Robin's first reaction was disbelief, and then the conviction that he was being dragged down into black, slimy water by something evil in a nightmare; he found he wasn't able to move or even cry out for the terrifying shock it gave him. He had an overpowering desire to scream, but all he could do was to listen to the transformed Middleton's insane babbling with a sort of paralysed fascination, and then suddenly he was able to move, and with a violent effort he fought himself free and scrambled away from the Middleton and got to the door.

'Get out!' he said, though his voice was unsteady with fright and desperation. 'Get out of here! Get out!'

The Middleton lay sprawled across the bed, without moving, gazing at him. His face, unrecognizably distorted and ugly, had gone chalk white and haggard,

and he was breathing like an animal and still trembling ; and Robin still felt it was all a nightmare, and that things like this couldn't happen, and wanted to be sick.

'Did you hear me?' he asked shakily. 'Get out ! Get out of here ! You're filthy ! You're horrible ! Get out of here !'

The Middleton still lay where he was. 'I can't,' he said at last, with difficulty. 'I can't move !' and then suddenly began to groan. 'Oh, God, you're cruel !' he said. 'I can't stand it !' His voice was so strained and savage that Robin felt suddenly giddy with nausea, and leant against the door to steady himself.

'For the last time,' he said, 'are you getting out of here or shall I call the night-porter and have you dragged out ?'

The Middleton suddenly plunged his face into the pillow and lay jerking spasmodically, still groaning. An irrational calmness began to steal over Robin as he watched, and then, without any conscious desire, he began to laugh, and leant against the door with his head back and laughed until the tears were running down his cheeks. Then he flung the door open and ran blindly down the passage to Tullio's room, which was empty, and once inside he slammed the door shut and locked it after him.

CHAPTER XI

Lobster Quadrille

WHEN he awoke, Tullio and a waiter with a pass-key were gazing down at him inquiringly, and bright daylight was streaming in through the windows.

'And what,' asked Tullio evenly, 'is the big idea in locking me out of my own room ?'

Robin rolled off the bed and stood up drowsily, feeling extremely stiff and tired, and took a moment or two to remember how he got there.

'I'm sorry,' he said dejectedly. 'I didn't mean to stay here all night. I'm just going now.'

Tullio looked at him sharply, and as he was moving to the door said, 'Hang on a minute,' and turned to the waiter. 'Bring a couple of coffees,' he ordered, and then, when the waiter had gone, pushed the door shut with his foot and turned back to Robin. 'Now tell me what's the matter,' he invited brusquely.

There was a silence, in which Robin looked out of the window, and then he said, 'It's pretty obvious, isn't it?' and sat on the edge of the bed.

Tullio lit a cigarette and threw the packet across to him. 'It's funny,' he said flatly; 'but I'd have thought a child of two could have sized up Middleton the minute it set eyes on him. You're in a nice spot, aren't you? Why did you let yourself in for it?'

'Because I'm a fool,' said Robin.

'How old are you?'

'I'll be twenty-one next month.'

'Time you learned about life, isn't it?'

'I have. Only it's happened a little late,' said Robin.

'And now, what're you going to do?'

'Go back to London.'

'And what about your play?'

Robin looked up at him, and then gave a half-smile and fell to studying the cigarette packet. 'I suppose I was a fool about that, too. I really believed she was going to put it on. Still, there's no harm done. I know some one who'll probably get it done by a Sunday Night Society in London.'

The waiter came back with two small trays with coffee and rolls, and set them down and departed.

Tullio poured out a cup of coffee and perched on the arm of a chair.

'You're not such a fool,' he said reassuringly. 'You weren't cut out for this racket, that's all. I wouldn't let it get you down. Drink your coffee.'

Robin poured out a cup obediently.

'And have a cigarette,' added Tullio. 'Calms the nerves.' He slid back into the chair and put his feet up

on the bed. 'Tell me, Gardner,' he proceeded. 'How much does this production really mean to you?'

'I don't know,' said Robin, after a pause. 'I did think everything.'

'What do you mean, you *did*?'

'Well, I don't now,' said Robin flatly.

'Then you didn't before,' returned Tullio, 'or it'd take more than a skirmish with a pansy to put you off it, so you won't lose much by clearing out.' He shot a quick glance at Robin, and then returned to his cigarette. 'You well off?' he added.

'No. At least, I get an allowance—quite a good one.'

'How much?'

'Two pounds ten a week until I finish my course.'

Tullio brought his feet down and stood up.

'I once earned that as a waiter,' he said shortly, after a pause. 'It doesn't go far, does it?'

'I don't know. I get along all right,' said Robin, who was annoyed with himself for answering Tullio's questions so submissively.

Tullio crossed over to the window and leant against it, looking out for a moment. 'Do you believe in your play?' he asked at last. 'I mean, you didn't want it on for the satisfaction of seeing your name on a poster?'

'I wanted to make enough money to——' said Robin, and then stopped and lit his cigarette.

'To what?' pursued Tullio, turning round. 'Live in Easy Street?'

'No!' said Robin indignantly. 'To get a start.'

'There're a hell of a lot of people wanting enough money to get a start,' said Tullio crisply. 'I was one myself, once. But I had to take a job as a waiter just the same, and this is where it landed me.' He walked the length of the room slowly, and then came back to the chair. 'Listen, Gardner. I'm going to do a half-wit thing. There's no room for both of us on this market. I know Lottie. If she pays out on your play I'll be lucky to have my expenses covered. If you went home now, I'd be left sitting pretty—Middleton's too damn

particular to waste his body beautiful on mutton dressed as lamb. I ought to be standing over you while you pack, but I'm going to tell you to stick it out. Middleton won't trouble you again after last night; and if he does, you can always cool him off for a spell by kicking him in the official headquarters. If Lottie makes any overtures to you, put her off politely and tactfully until you've got your contract in writing, and go ahead and get your play on. Pardon me while I shave.' He disappeared into the bathroom, and continued from there, raising his voice above the rush of the taps. 'If I know Middleton he'll suggest to Lottie that it's time we all went home again. Once you're back home you're O.K.'

Robin sat staring at his foot, trying to marshal his thoughts. He still felt he was right about dropping the whole thing and going home by the first 'plane that morning, but something not quite praiseworthy inside him kept insisting that Tullio was right and that nothing should stand in the way of his play, and that it was not virtuousness that made him want to shun the Middleton and his ilk, but an offended sense of taste.

Rather conscious that he was doing a Big Thing, he rose and put his head round the bathroom door. 'I think I'll go home, all the same,' he said, feeling a lot like Sydney Carton.

Tullio arrested a razor-stroke in mid-air and surveyed him through the looking-glass. 'You're an unctuous little prig; aren't you?' he said expressionlessly. 'You'll get a hell of a long way in the theatre if this is how you take your baptism. I'd make up your mind, Shakespeare. If you can't come through this you'll never come through anything, and you may as well give up the Stage and breed rabbits. Kind of a test case, if you can look at it with half a bloody eye.'

He stropped his razor diligently and then ran his thumb lightly along it. 'Though why the hell I'm talking to you like a wet-nurse is something I'll never know. Buzz off and get your clothes on, you silly little kite, and stop imagining you're the victim of an outrage.'

t happens every day.' And he fell to shaving his left cheek disinterestedly.

Feeling the size of fourpence Robin returned to his room, wrapped in deep and uncertain thought, and dressed slowly. As he stooped to pick up his shoes his eyes caught an envelope lying on the floor near the door, and he crossed over in his stockinged feet and picked it up. It was addressed to him in the Middleton's extravagant longhand, and he opened it, half unwillingly, and took out a sheet of hotel writing paper.

'Dear Robin,' he read. *'I find it difficult to apologize to you for what happened last night, and I have no excuse to offer for a piece of unforgivable behaviour. I have made an unfortunate and humiliating mistake, and I give you my sincere assurance that there will be no repetition of last night's incident. It has occurred to me that, after an experience which must have been repulsive to you, you may be contemplating returning to London to-day. This would be so injurious to your play that, rather than let you suffer through any mistake of mine, I am prepared to leave instead, and let you go ahead with the production without me. If, on the other hand, you are prepared to accept my word that I would gladly give my right hand for it not to have happened, and try to dismiss it as the action of an unfortunate at the mercy of a too-demanding impulse, I shall do everything in my power to help you forget it ever happened.'*

'Yours sincerely,

'Douglas Middleton.'

To which Robin, touched by the Middleton's humility, wrote this in reply :

'Dear Middleton—

'I have just received your note. I would be very glad to forget the whole thing ever happened, and understand about your making a mistake.'

'Yours sincerely,

'Robin Gardner.'

So four more days crept by in deadly dullness, relieved by runs into the country in the red Rolls-Royce, and true to his word the Middleton behaved as if nothing had happened; though all this did was to charge the atmosphere with strain and wither all conversation between them except for formalities in the presence of Lottie, who failed to notice anything wrong. Robin found moreover that no matter how hard he tried to be Christian, he was developing a deeply rooted hatred of the Middleton, based mainly on the sudden contempt that had taken the place of his adulation. He was able to see, with new vision, facets of the Middleton that he had never dreamed existed before, and to understand the savage sexuality lying just under the surface of his smooth veneer. He saw, also, that the savage sexuality, far from abating as promised in the letter, was mounting up solidly every day, and that the Middleton was making very little attempt to check it.

The Middleton, on the other hand, who seemed doomed to remain at cross-purposes with Robin, gave him no credit for his new vision, and as a result had not given up hope of conquest. Something in him would not credit the fact that Robin could resist his compelling charm and persuasive attraction indefinitely. It was the first time he had ever bungled the handling of his quarry, and his professional pride was touched. Incensed to inexorable purpose, he developed a new ruthlessness towards Robin, and became so charged with physical excitement that he found himself in acute discomfort most of the day, and his nerves tightened under the strain until it needed very little to set them snapping, though even he did not realize how little, and was caught unawares.

At lunch in the apartment on Sunday, Lottie was carrying on willing shoulders the bulk of the conversation, to which neither Tullio nor Robin was paying undue attention, when all of a sudden the Middleton put down his knife and fork and stared at her.

‘What did you mean exactly when you said that?’ he asked in a strained voice.

Tullio and Robin looked up in surprise, and Lottie

gazed at him pop-eyed, for as far as she knew she had been telling them a story about her Little Lord Fauntleroy days; but if the Middleton wanted to start anything, she was more than willing to give him change.

'Well, for cryin' out loud!' she returned. 'What did ya think I meant, if it ain't what I said? Something eatin' ya, Doug?'

'You may as well have said it out right and be done with it! They all know what you meant!' said the Middleton with illogical heat, and then suddenly threw his napkin on the table and rose. 'Excuse me, will you?' he asked in a clipped voice and went to his room.

Lottie gazed after him in wonder.

'He's gone crazy!' she announced firmly. 'Crazy! What did I say to make him do that, Tullio?'

'As far as I know, nothing,' said Tullio, without great interest.

'Robin! Did I say anything a guy could take as a dirty crack at him? Maybe I did it by mistake? Far as I know, it was where I played Little Lord Fauntleroy and the curtain went up on Barney giving me a smacker, on account of us not knowing the curtain was going up. Gee, I can't see anything with two handles to that!'

'It's the vapours,' said Tullio. 'Let him calm down while we finish lunch.'

Lottie nibbled a button-mushroom half-heartedly and then shifted restlessly in her chair.

'Well, maybe if I offended him without meaning to, I'd better go along and square up with him,' she suggested uncertainly.

'I wouldn't,' Tullio advised. 'Unless you're dying of curiosity.'

Lottie sat back and toyed daintily with a glass of champagne, but the constraint was short-lived. 'I've never known Doug go on this way before,' she said, openly intrigued. 'I guess I *will* go—and see what's bit him!' And she rose and swept out of the room in pursuit of the Middleton.

Tullio leaned back.

'This is giving me a pain in the neck,' he said gloomily.

'I'm going out for a walk.' He rose and stretched himself. 'And I'll swear the oysters were bad. Ah, the hell with the lot of you!' He filled his cigarette case from a box on the table and buttoned his coat. 'If any one wants to know where I am, I fell in the Seine and am now floating down to the sea bottom-up and festooned with barnacles.' And he went 'out into the passage, closing the door behind him with unnecessary violence.

Robin sat for a moment or two drawing little faces on the tablecloth with the butter-knife, debating with himself whether to join Tullio on his walk or go to a cinema or sit and show Lottie that he was grateful to her for putting his play on by letting her talk at him. Then Lottie came back from the Middleton's room and flapped a hand urgently at Robin from the door.

'Say! Come on here, will you? Something's gone wrong!' she said, palpably awed. 'Quick!'

Robin jumped to his feet and hurried after her, struggling to remember the French for 'coroner' and 'policeman.' At the Middleton's door he was arrested in his stride by unmanly sounds from within and hesitated discreetly; but Lottie, who had gone in, beckoned wildly for him to come and look, and he entered unwillingly.

The Middleton lay upon the floor, though carefully in the middle part of the carpet, and was shaking with heavy sobs, his face buried in his arms. At first Robin took it for one more of the Middleton's facets, and was not impressed; and then he realized that it was not the Middleton's voice that was racked with sobs, but the voice of some one years younger, and that something the Middleton had taken great pains to suppress for years had suddenly been exposed, and that he was completely without any sort of protection. With the collapse of the Middleton's nerves his carefully acquired personality had dissolved away as if it had never been there, and it was unnerving to hear the bewilderment and loneliness in his voice, and grotesque to think that it came from a man of such metallic self-assurance. Everything he

stood for was suddenly shown up in the full light of pathetic futility, and Robin felt that he and Lottie were looking at something no one was ever meant to see.

He motioned to Lottie to go, and though unwilling to depart from something that interested her enormously, she appreciated the wisdom of it and went. Robin closed the door and went over to the Middleton and knelt down beside him and took his arm.

'Come on,' he said quietly. 'Let me help you up. You'll be all right.'

The Middleton shook his arm free and kept his face hidden, though his sobbing grew quieter.

Robin sat back on his heels, a little helplessly, for he had very little idea of how to soothe weeping hysteria, and waited for the Middleton to make some sort of move that he could help with.

After a while the Middleton, conscious of his presence, mastered his tears and looked up slowly. Instead of displaying a red, swollen face, which was the least that Robin expected, he looked ten years younger, as if a passive relaxation had transfigured him. Without speaking Robin put forward his arm, which the Middleton took, and helped him to his feet.

'I haven't done anything like this before, in my life,' he said unsteadily, and leant over the dressing-table and surveyed himself ruefully in the glass. 'God, look at my face!'

He picked up a powder puff and applied it briskly. 'I'm perfectly all right, by the way. I can't think what got hold of me.' He threw the puff down and turned on Robin, leaning against the table and holding on to it. 'You mostly, I suppose—but only indirectly. You suddenly made me feel I wasn't as in tune with the world as I thought I was; which is a bad thing to feel when you've lived too much of your life to go back and see what it's like the other way. Damn you, Robin. You got under my skin!' And he laughed, though without any humour, and Robin realized that the synthetic Middleton was back and that the Middleton he had

seen on the floor was now as extinct as if he had never existed. He said something vague about excusing himself and went back to Lottie, who was pacing impatiently up and down the sitting-room awaiting enlightenment.

'Well?' she demanded loudly, as soon as she saw him. 'What happened? Was he sick?'

'He says he's all right now,' said Robin.

'What was it?'

'Nerves, I think.'

'Sure it was nerves!' said Lottie impatiently. 'But which, and where did they take him?'

'I don't know,' said Robin uncomfortably. 'I think it'd be kind to him to forget about it.'

Lottie trotted up and down the room once more, with a restive foot, and then swirled about and announced: 'I'm sick o' this dump! Robin, 'phone the clerk for my bill and find out when the next 'plane goes! I'm goin' back to Lunnon!'

Something flashed past her and nearly took her off her balance. It was Robin making for the telephone.

CHAPTER XII

A Flight of White Butterflies

KNOWING Garstin as you do, it will come as no bomb to learn that the moment Robin had left England for the Moxor Hotel he girt up his loins and took himself unto the house in Ebury Street with two dozen orange tulips and a silky tongue to offer sympathies to Diana in her new-found desolation, and took her to see Clark Gable at the Empire in Leicester Square that evening, having borrowed five pounds from the Middleton before his departure. He was more than a little injured, on seeing Diana home afterwards, not to be asked in, but contented himself with an assignation for the following evening, when he would call at seven-thirty.

• He walked home scheming to himself to his heart's content, for he had awaited his Hour with great patience and anticipation, and now that it was all but his, nothing was going to trip it up at the last moment and make him look a sucker. 'Lull to false security and then pounce,' will be found written on his heart when he dies, if any one takes the trouble to look (and there is anything large enough for the writing on it to be distinguished), and if you find it hard to envisage any one like Garstin pursuing his quarry for so long when other fish in the sea were there for the tickling, you misjudge him. Slightly. Admittedly it is not for the Garstins of this world to experience the uplift of pure emotion, for love as you and I know it is not for them; but there is an inferior brand, much to do with organic disturbances (see Middleton) which gives them much the same reaction, less the spiritual quality that you and I find so essential.

Hence, while you and I can face every known hardship for years and years and years to win a great love, the Garstins come armed only with their organic disturbances and keep going just as long. I have never thought this fair. Particularly as so few women can tell the one from the other, and as near as dammit prefer the Garstins. But tcha! We digress.

• The next evening at six Garstin put down his pen, laid the papers on his desk carefully away in a drawer, and rose.

• 'Where are you going?' asked Flossie at once, scenting plot.

'Out,' said Garstin.

'Dirty little thing!' said Flossie, putting his papers away too. 'Let's go and have a drink at the "Stagnant Cheese" first? I haven't been to the "Stagnant Cheese" for simply years! But years!'

'Right,' said Garstin, 'if you pay for it. And I'll have to leave at seven.'

They departed for the 'Stagnant Cheese,' and lo! Garstin overdrank himself, and spoke bold words.

'You wouldn't know, Flossie, you ole tart,' he said

confidentially, seizing Flossie by a buttonhole and drawing him close; 'but I'm a hellava hit with women. Can't think whatitis—just go crazy 'bout me. I mean, there it is, so why not face it? Hellava hit with women.'

'Really, Garstin, you *do* get uncouth when you drink!' said Flossie chidingly, tugging at the buttonhole. 'Not to *maul* me! People are *looking*!'

'Take to-night,' Garstin proceeded, drawing Flossie closer and attempting to pick the horse-shoes off his tie. 'Take t'night. Makin' whoopee t'night. Dinah Shand. And me. Makin' whoopee!'

'I'm not in the *least* interested,' said Flossie coldly. 'And please to let go my *buttonhole*, Woofie!'

Garstin gave it two tugs, defiantly, and retained his hold.

'Doug gets Robin, I get Dinah. S'fair, ain't it? No complaints, I hope? Everybody sa'sfied. Middleton and Bannock. Man, woman, or dog, we throw it on a bed. Motto. Flossie, queen of the carrier pigeons, I mus' have another drink.'

'You can buy your *own*, then!' said Flossie viciously, who was pinned by the buttonhole at an angle of forty-five degrees across the table, and was getting the stitch. 'Will you let me go?'

'Not till you say you're sorry,' Garstin returned, glowering.

'Sorry for *what*? ' demanded Flossie exasperatedly.

'*You* know well 'nough,' Garstin said meaningly. 'Unless I'm wrong and it's some other chap; but you wouldn't do a thing like that to a nole pal, woodja, Flossie? Yes, you would though, you snipe! Not a word, or I'll thrash you to within a ninch of your life! Call me a taxi, will you, Flossie! Any taxi. Gotta make whoopee!' He rose gingerly, still gripping the buttonhole, and swayed forward into Flossie's arms, which kept him from total collapse with difficulty. 'Oopsie, whoopsie!' he cried brightly and swung back to zero. 'Look, people! Flossie's trying to commit a nuisance in a public place!'

With scarlet ears Flossie ran him unceremoniously

out of the 'Stagnant Cheese' under a battery of disapproving eyes, and leant him gingerly against a lamp-post while he hailed a taxi. When it drew up, he unclasped Garstin's arms, which had wrapped themselves round the lamp-post as a precautionary measure, and after a struggle got him on to the floor of the taxi and demanded in a voice of suffering where he wanted to go.

'Eb'ry Street,' said Garstin vaguely. 'Tell him drive down and stop when I bang on the window! Good-bye, Flossie, you *demi-mondaine*, you! Goo'bye, goo'bye, goo'bye!'

The time was eight-fifteen.

At eight Christopher Lovell had 'phoned and asked Diana if she and Robin would like him to come round with more beer, and Diana rather intricately explained that Robin was out for the evening, and that she didn't quite know whether to ask him or not, as she had been expecting Garstin to call for her and wasn't sure if he was late or had forgotten, but that if Christopher liked to come round and chance Garstin suddenly arriving with other plans he would be more than welcome, though it seemed a pity for him to come all that way without being sure what would happen when he got there; and Christopher expressed complete willingness to take a chance, and said he would be along about half-past eight; and Diana couldn't help feeling a glow of unmistakable relief that she wasn't going to spend the evening alone with Garstin after all.

Consequently, she was greatly taken aback when Garstin presented himself (a little soggy underfoot, but not so obviously drunk as he had been when Everard had seen him off in the taxi) at eight twenty-five, all abubble with profuse apologies for being late.

'Detained,' he explained, doffing his hat and overcoat with a heavy flourish, 'at the office. Couldn't get away. Being worked like a pack-mule. All the responsible jobs.'

He sat down on the divan and leant back so that his hair made a grease-mark on the wall. 'I'm very

tired, Dinah. Very, very tired. Do you mind if we don't go anywhere to-night? Just sit? Very, very tired.'

'Of course I don't mind,' said Diana. 'I'll make you a cup of tea.' She paused hesitatingly. 'Garstin—you haven't been drinking, have you?' she added with a note of deep reproof.

'One brandy,' Garstin returned without a blush, 'for medicinal purposes only, on account of a headache. Would you grudge me that?'

Diana admitted she wouldn't, without much enthusiasm, and began to collect the tea-things from their lair behind the door. Garstin reclined gracefully on the divan and watched her with a smouldering eye.

'Did any one ever tell you you have the loveliest pair of breasts in London?' he asked suddenly.

Diana shot him a startled look but retained her dignity.

'Don't be silly,' she said briefly, and turned back to the cupboard.

'But you have,' Garstin insisted with enormous gravity. 'You're very, very beautiful, Diana. Anyway, I think so.'

Diana decided that the best thing to do was to take no notice and see if it stopped him.

'Do you know something?' continued Garstin, aflame. 'I've fallen in love with you, Dinah. I love you. I know we're cousins and all that, but look at Byron. Does it offend your false modesty?'

Diana turned and faced him firmly.

'I think you'd better go home, Garstin,' she said, outwardly composed. 'Because you've been drinking too much and you're being very stupid.'

'That's evading the issue!' Garstin returned obstusely. 'Don't think you fool me for a moment. We know each other too well to do an act, Dinah. O.K. to do an act for Robin. He does one himself. But you and me—no. Can't fool each other, Dinah.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Diana returned with spirit; 'but it just gets sillier and sillier. Please, Garstin, go home.' There was very nearly a

hint of undignified supplication in her voice, for she was dreading a *contretemps* with Garstin after the dire woe that had accompanied his bout with Robin in Everard's bedroom.

'Now, you don't really mean that,' said Garstin roguishly, rising with tipsy deliberation; 'but I'll play. Please don't send me home, Dinah.'

'You *are* horrid,' said Diana, as one viewing something behind bars in a zoo. 'I never realized how horrid.'

'What'd you do if I refused to go? Call for help?'

'Probably,' said Diana evenly.

'You wouldn't really, you know,' said Garstin, winking owlishly and patting his nose with his finger, 'on account of Scandal. The place would buzz for weeks. Probably be asked to leave. You wouldn't want that. No, you woont call frelp.' He swayed gently, but caught his balance before it was too late. 'My, what a figure, Dinah! Why wasn't I told sooner?'

'Garstin, will you please stop talking like that and go home?' Diana broke in, with a note of urgency. 'You'll be sorry to-morrow. Why don't you save yourself the trouble of apologizing later by going now? It's so *silly*, Garstin!'

'Tantalize me, ha?' said Garstin.

He made a sudden dart at her and caught her wrist.

'Garstin! Let me go!' Diana ordered quickly, struggling. 'Garstin! Stop it! Let me go!'

'In a minute,' said Garstin, showing unexpected strength. He drew her close, and then flung his arms round her. 'G'wan! Pretend you don't like it!' he flaunted. Diana put her hands against his chest and pushed as hard as she could, but Garstin was not to be dislodged. With a sudden twist he kissed her on the mouth and clung there in spite of all her struggles. At last she shook her head free and beat against him with her fists.

'Let me go! Garstin, you fool! You silly little

fool ! Let me go !' she cried, with tears of anger in her eyes. Garstin soared to greater heights on his new-found strength. He caught the collar of her dress and tore it away from the shoulder, and then implanted a sticky kiss on the smooth skin it revealed. With a last desperate effort Diana exerted all her energy and pushed so hard that he was taken off his guard and staggered backwards, tripped on the rug, measured his length on the floor with a re-echoing thud, hit his head on the edge of the tray, and was partially deafened by the ear-splitting clatter as the tea-things fell about him.

There was a slight pause, and then he lifted a dazed head from the debris and surveyed her forlornly.

'Crumbs,' he said mildly. 'Was that nice?'

And at that moment Christopher Lovell knocked on the door. In her wrath Diana's finer feelings fell before the desire to see Garstin kicked down two flights of stairs. She pulled her dress back over her shoulder and opened the door breathlessly.

'Hullo !' said Christopher, taking in the scene with amazement. 'What the——'

'Christopher,' she said, speaking quickly, 'would you please throw Garstin out, as hard as you can?'

'Sure !' said Christopher willingly. 'Hold the beer !'

He piled three bottles into her arms and advanced on Garstin.

'Here !' said Garstin timorously. 'You be careful what you——' Here Christopher caught him by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his pants and lifted him into the air with indifferent ease. 'Ooohh !' cried Garstin from the soul, for there was a square foot of his flesh in the grip on his pants. 'Wait a minute ! Take it easy ! I can explain !—'

They disappeared through the door, and a succession of loud rattling bumps drowned the gist of Garstin's plea for a suspended sentence. These faded gradually, and culminated in the slam of the front door and a string of panic-stricken clucks from Miss Abernethy, who had missed being bowled flat in the hall by the skin

of her teeth during the expulsion, and then Christopher came upstairs and asked Diana anxiously if she was all right. Diana returned by asking anxiously if Garstin was all right, for from the bedroom the noises had augured painful death, and she hadn't meant Christopher to kill him; and was assured that Garstin was still with the living.

'He lifted his hat and coat,' said Diana limply, not knowing whether it was funny or sad that any one who had just been thrown out should leave his hat and coat.

'That's all right,' said Christopher briskly and opened the window. 'You still there?' he called down. Garstin's voice lifted from the pavement in an assurance that he was just going. 'Good,' said Christopher, and dropped his hat and coat on him and shut the window.

Diana sat down on the corner of the divan and gazed at him speechlessly. If Miss Abernethy had suddenly floated in through the door on piano-wires, in red flannel bathing-drawers and an Alpine shooting-jacket, it would have conveyed little or nothing after the shock of Garstin's onslaught.

Christopher Lovell opened a beer-bottle and poured out a glass and handed it to her.

'Forget about it,' he advised practically. 'There's a good film at the Curzon, last house half-past nine. Let's make the beer look silly and then crash the half-crown seats. I think I'll hang around within earshot until Robin gets back, though I'd be the most amazed ham actor in London if that little runt comes within a five-mile radius of Ebury Street this side of Christmas. Gosh, he tore your dress! I wish I'd noticed before I helped him go!' He lifted his glass. 'Here's ho!' he said cheerfully.

Diana lifted her glass too.

'Here's ho!' she repeated. 'And thank you so much, Christopher.'

It was quite natural and in order for Christopher to call round the next evening to find out if the Garstin

menace had showed any signs of breaking out again, and it seemed a little ungrateful to tell him Robin was still out, without explaining that he was away for a week, and instead of telling him that he was with Ada FitzGerald, which was what every one else had been told, Diana found herself telling Christopher about the sudden flight to Paris with the Middleton and Lottie Osgood and all it portended. This was due mainly to the fact that Robin's first letter had arrived, and had been so optimistic and reassuring that Diana had immediately read between the lines and been seized with the fear that all was not well, and they were too far away from each other to do anything about it. These fears were committed to Christopher in the logical unfolding of the conversation and at once set at rest by his wise counsel, but they came back again after he had gone, and she thought seriously of finding out how much it would cost to 'phone to Paris, and then decided she couldn't in case some one else answered the 'phone and had a scene with Robin about it afterwards, so she wrote a long comforting letter, instead, without giving away the fact that she was in any way disturbed as to Robin's well-being.

The next evening Christopher Lovell came round again, and the evening after that, and every evening until Robin came back; and on the last of these evenings, when Christopher had been asked in after seeing Diana home from a talkie to have a cup of tea and they were sitting by the gas-fire, Christopher suddenly said: 'Don't you despise people who say rash things because they haven't the strength of will not to? I do. It means they haven't any guts. I haven't. I'm in love with you. Isn't it damn silly?'

There was a long silence.

'You can laugh if you want to,' he added, with a great show of lightness.

'You don't really mean that, though, do you?' said Diana, half hopefully, and very far indeed from laughing.

'I don't really mean anything,' said Christopher, gazing into the fire and hugging his knee meditatively.

'That's why I can tell you I love you. It's like some one crooning it at you on a gramophone record.'

'Oh, Christopher, I'm sorry,' said Diana, after a pause, in distress.

'Why?' he returned without taking his gaze off the fire. 'It doesn't mean I expect to be loved in return or anything. I didn't mean to tell you at all. I don't know why I did. Because I'm balmy, I suppose. It's certainly nothing to worry about! It's time I went home. Begging your pardon,' he added, 'and pretend I haven't said a word.'

He rose to his feet, and Diana gazed up at him with deeply troubled eyes, wishing she knew the correct things to say, and whether to take him seriously or not, and stricken with the thought that quite possibly, somehow or other, without knowing it, she had been encouraging him.

He struggled into his coat, which was shabby and had threads loose in the linings, and held out his hand.

'No offence taken?' he asked pleasantly. 'None meant.'

'Of course not, Christopher,' said Diana. 'It won't— Will it make any difference? I wouldn't like it to.'

He leant against the door and grinned reassuringly. 'Not if I can help it,' he said. 'I don't think you quite understand. I'm a hardened and bitter cynic, actually. I just go around looking like this so as not to frighten little children. I was married once. Ever heard the song about the Wife and the Very Best Friend? I posed for it.' He slid down the door and seated himself comfortably on the floor. 'This'll give you a big thrill, this life-story. We were married six months. Then she left suddenly. The poignant thing is, there wasn't a Note. You know—propped against the brilliantine on the dressing-table, saying it was best for both of us and would I try to forgive her. I didn't even realize she'd run away until her mother 'phoned me the next day and asked what the hell, why hadn't I stopped her while there'd still been time. The fellow I didn't tell you

about—the Very Best Friend—sent me a cable from the ship giving me a rough idea of what they'd done, but not why they'd done it, so I went and got drunk, and the next thing I knew it was next year, and she'd got a divorce in Mexico, and I found that it didn't hurt me like a knife-wound, and that I didn't care whether they married or lived in trees and ate nuts. It was all too long ago. All gone now. The only thing is that everything else went with it. I can't feel joy and I can't feel pain, and it'll never be Spring again, and you'll never know the peacefulness of it! So you see, when I tell you I'm in love with you, it doesn't mean a thing. Get the idea?'

'Yes,' said Diana uncertainly, not getting the idea at all.

'So you don't have to be sorry about it. But I'll take sixpenceworth of pity. I'm very partial to pity. "Alas, poor Lovell," people say, and I eat it all up and want more. You have my telephone number. Ring me if the human blue-bottle troubles you again. God, I've got cramp in the shanks and can't get up.' He rose quite easily, however, and slapped his hat on to the back of his head with a flourish. 'Good night,' he said.

'Good night,' said Diana, and watched him go down the stairs from the door, until the black marble negro holding a salver hid him from view, and then went back into Number Eleven and closed the door and wished she didn't feel quite so flattered at being told he was in love with her when it was really very sad and called for remorse at having done something to encourage him, and decided that at heart she must be conceited and not really so nice as she had always hoped, and went to bed ashamed.

If you are wondering why this chapter was called 'A Flight of White Butterflies,' draw solace from the fact that I am, too.

CHAPTER XIII

*‘But when the Tide rises and sharks are around,
His voice has a timid and tremulous sound.’*

IN spite of Lottie’s resolve to quit Paris at once, it wasn’t till Monday afternoon that four seats could be booked on the ‘plane, so that when Robin arrived back in London, Diana was at the Studio, and left to come home just as Robin left for the Studio to find her, with the maddening result that their buses passed somewhere between Marble Arch and Hyde Park Corner, and they never saw each other until hours later, when Robin got back to Ebury Street again.

In the tremendous excitement of being together at last and the thousand and one things of importance that had to be said, they forgot to go out for supper until twenty-past nine, when the special course was off, and they had to have Danish eggs and tired bread-and-butter, which cost more than the special course and took up very little room.

In no time at all Diana had heard all about the week in Paris and the ogre the Middleton had turned out to be, and the advice Tullio had given Robin about getting the play produced in spite of everything, and how awful it had been, taken all round; and then Robin suddenly realized he had done all the talking and apologized and asked what had happened while he was away, and after a little hesitation Diana told him about Garstin.

‘My hat!’ said Robin, pink with rage. ‘He didn’t! My hat, I *wish* I’d been there! It just shows I should never have gone away! But, Diana, I can’t believe it! He wouldn’t dare—— Gosh, just wait till I get my hands on him!’ And looked so much as if he were going to dash out of the restaurant just as he was and find Garstin and attack him that Diana seized his arm and held on to it anxiously.

‘It’s all right, though, Robin. Really!’ she said

quickly. 'Christopher Lovell threw him all the way down the stairs and out of the house—it must have hurt terribly! I couldn't feel angry with him after hearing the noise it made, so you mustn't do anything more to him—promise me you won't, Robin! He isn't really worth it, either. Otherwise I shouldn't have told you!'

'But he ought to have his neck broken!' said Robin furiously. 'He ought to be kicked round and round a room! Did Christopher really hurt him?'

'He *must* have. You could hear it all over the house!'

'Oh, damn!' said Robin, hitting the table. 'Things just seem to go on getting rottener and rottener! Oh, *hell*, I feel so angry that it had to happen to you too! I could stick it while I thought you'd be all right, but now I want to—I want to go out with a machine-gun and just shoot them all down in bunches! People get fined for driving past signal lights and put in jail for stealing food, and no one does anything about people like Garstin! *And* Middleton! Do you know that *now* I know what murderers feel like before they do it?'

'Robin,' said Diana restrainingly, for he was quite terrible in his wrath, 'you *mustn't* let them make you as angry as that! I don't think they're worth it. It's paying them a sort of compliment, thinking they're important enough to get angry about. I suppose really we ought to be sorry for them.'

'But you *can't* be sorry for them!' Robin objected furiously. 'They're deliberately rotten, because they want to be, because they're vicious and filthy! They're not freaks, they're—they're——'

'Can I 'ave your bill, please,' said the waitress dispassionately. 'Weer closin'.'

As they walked back to the rooms in Ebury Street Robin calmed a little, because it was more or less impossible to be in a temper with Diana close beside you and her arm tucked in yours; but he couldn't help still yearning for Garstin to appear suddenly so that he could

leap on him and tread him into the pavement, and then pick him up and do it all over again twice more.

Drawn up outside the house was Christopher's faithful Austin, and in it was the faithful Christopher. He hooted and waved his arm in greeting, and leant out over the side as they hurried up.

'Wotcheer!' he said brightly. 'Abbie told me you were back, so I thought I'd just wait and say hullo before I vamoosed.'

Robin shook him warmly by the hand. 'I'm jolly glad you did!' he said. 'I want to thank you for what you did to Garstin!'

'Oh, Diana's told you about it, has she? I didn't do much. Not as much as I'd have liked to. Just threw him out. By the way, I was let into the secret about the Paris trip. How's Mistinguette? Bet you're glad to be back.'

'I am!' said Robin fervently.

'That's why I didn't stay,' Christopher nodded. 'Give me a ring when you get used to each other again, and we'll assemble.' He trod on the self-starter, and for once it worked. 'See that? Witchery. Good-bye and good hunting with the play!' And without waiting to be coaxed in for a few minutes, he slid into gear with a tormenting grind of inner works and rattled away into the night.

Robin gazed after him appreciatively. 'Isn't he a decent fellow?' he said, rather as if Christopher was alone in his kind. 'I mean, suppose we hadn't known him—there wouldn't have been any one to throw Garstin downstairs. Gosh, isn't it awful just to think of it!' He caught Diana's hand and held it tightly. 'But nothing like that's ever going to happen again. I'll never leave you alone again as long as I live!'

'But, darling,' said Diana, 'there'll be times when you may *have* to.'

'Either,' said Robin firmly, 'we go together, or I don't go.' He put his head a little on one side and gazed at her with bright eyes. 'Diana, something impossible's happened.'

'What?' asked Diana with a note of anxiety.

'I love you more than I did before I went away. Thousands of times more. I just suddenly feel that I love you too much to use it all up, and it's making me tingle inside, like electricity or something—know what I mean?'

'Mm,' said Diana, nodding, but not trusting herself to speak.

'It makes me feel I'm cheating, being as happy as all this. I wasn't really meant to love any one as much as I love you. I feel as if I'd stolen something that really belongs to somebody miles better than me.'

'I feel that too,' said Diana inaudibly.

'Nobody's better than *you*, though! Nobody's even anywhere *near* being half as good! Oh, Diana!' he said, with a sudden little intake of breath. 'I do love you so very much!' And he kissed her mouth, and then held her in his arms, and feeling her heart beating against his made him quite dizzy with excitement and pride; and then Number Four coughed politely and asked them if they would mind very much letting him pass, as he would like to get in out of the rain, and when he had slipped past and closed the door hastily after him, they found that it *had* been raining hard; and that they were very damp indeed, so they just waited long enough for Number Four to get to his room and then rushed upstairs to dry.

As Robin was changing into his slippers Miss Abernethy tapped on the door.

'Mr. Gardner,' she called. 'There was a telephone message come for you. I see you didn't collect it off the board downstairs, so I brought it up. It's to 'phone a Mrs. Hiscod at the Ritz Hotel as sure as ye came in.'

'Oh—thanks, Miss Abernethy,' said Robin, not as enthusiastically as he might have. 'I'll be out in a minute. I got caught in the rain.'

'Ay,' said Miss Abernethy, 'so I sawer from the kitchen window. I'm making a cup o' tea, by the by. I'll bring ye both a drop to Miss Shand's room in five minutes. It 'ud be a peety to cartch anither cold agen.'

Robin brushed his hair quickly and joined her on the landing.

'I see you're glad tu be bark,' she added with a whimsy that weighed pounds. 'Miss Shand was beginning to luke a wee bit lost wi'out you.' They descended the stairs together. 'You'll have noticed there's a new quilt to your bed?'

'Oh yes,' said Robin, who hadn't. 'Thank you Miss Abernethy.'

'And I had the curtains oot and washed. There was a lead pencil and a tube of tooth paste dropped behind the wardrobe. Mrs. Wallace has no been cleaning under it, I find. The thing is, ye *always* have tu be watching them, and I've no got eyes in the back o' my head, though I often feel unequipped to watch Mrs. Wallace wi'out 'em.'

They passed Diana's room, and Robin popped his head inside and explained that he was just going to 'phone and would soon be back, and Miss Abernethy was giving them tea, and then caught up with Miss Abernethy again in the hall, but parted almost at once, he to the telephone booth and Miss Abernethy to nether regions to boil a kettle.

When one switch-board and another had connected Robin with Lottie's reverberating contralto, and he had moved the receiver six inches off his ear and could still hear without strain, he learned that she was to meet Meadowsweet and Angusson at lunch the next day and then discuss business in the afternoon, and that he was to present himself at Hearnkangel Chambers at a quarter to four. Lottie pointed out that this was against the Middleton's advice, but that she considered he had a right to be present at all matters concerning his play, and would see to it that he was. 'And climb into a tuxedo,' she added lustily. 'We're havin' drinks here till it's late enough to go arn to the Dorchester, and we want you along!'

'Please,' said Robin, 'would you mind if I went to bed instead? Thank you very much, all the same.'

'Ya ain't *tired*? ' demanded Lottie incredulously.

'Yes,' said Robin. 'I am. *May* I go to bed instead?'

'Sure,' said Lottie, 'if you're that fond of ya bed! See you to-morrow, quarter to four! 'Bye now, son!' and hung up on him.

Robin put the receiver back and came out of the call-box slowly.

To-morrow they were starting on his play.

He ought to be excited and thrilled.

He wasn't.

A photogravure print of Lord Roberts looked down at him from the wall with foreboding in its expression.

'You're going to have a flop,' said the photogravure print of Lord Roberts quietly.

He went slowly up the stairs.

The seagull in the glass box on the first landing caught his eye and looked suddenly sinister.

'You're going to have a flop,' said the seagull in the glass box.

On the next landing the black marble negro holding the salver ignored him until he was almost past it, and then said 'Flop!' out of the corner of its mouth. He went into Diana's room and shut the door after him and sat on the fender-stool.

'Diana,' he said with calm and absolute conviction. 'I'm going to have a flop.'

§

At a quarter to four the next day he arrived at Hearnangel Chambers and presented himself to the office-boy, who professed to know nothing about him and went into the glass pot-hole and consulted the secretary about it, and then came back, very nearly openly suspicious, and asked Robin to wait, and then sat down at his desk in the corner and watched him like a lynx. At twenty-past four Lottie Osgood arrived with the Middleton and greeted him with such extravagance that the office-boy felt thwarted and the secretary came

out of the glass pot-hole and said she would tell Mr. Meadowsweet and Mr. Angusson they were there at once, and disappeared into the inner Tabernacle, and Lottie swirled around the waiting-room looking at the framed photographs of famous stars (none of which was signed owing to the laws against forgery) and hummed a little tune to herself, and the Middleton sat down next to Robin and asked him in a pleasant voice if he was glad to be back in London again, to which Robin answered yes, he was, and the secretary came back and said that Meadson Ltd. would see them in one minute.

'What's wrong with now?' Lottie returned swiftly.

The secretary, taken aback, said that Meadson Ltd. was terribly busy at the moment talking to America, but was sure that it'd be finished by the time the minute was up.

'What they talking to America about?' pursued Lottie, advancing on the secretary. 'Me?'

'Oh no! We have a large connection in New York,' said the secretary, backing into the glass pot-hole fearfully. 'I'll let you know the moment they're free.'

Angusson, who was listening with his ear pressed against the door, signed to Meadowsweet to ring the bell, and ran back to his desk and pulled a sheaf of papers out of a drawer and sprayed them out in front of him. The secretary peeped round the door, and he waved a hand at her.

'Show in Mrs. Osgood,' he announced importantly, and then hissed across to Meadowsweet, 'Look busy, you Goddam fathead!' and picked up a dummy telephone that rang when he pressed a button under the table, and looked once round to see that nothing was amiss and then pressed the receiver to his ear.

'Will you come this way?' said the secretary, opening the door wide and standing aside for Lottie.

'Yeah,' said Lottie, and entered full on.

'Well, look, Cochran, do you mind if I leave it over for the moment and 'phone you later?' said Angusson

into the 'phone. 'What? Yes, of course we'd like to do a revue with you. It's simply a question of whether we can fit it in—we've got a heavy programme ahead as it is. Right,' said Angusson. 'Right—right. Good-bye, C.B.' He rang off and rattled at the secretary; 'Remind me, eleven-thirty to-morrow—'phone C. B. Cochran.'

'Yes, Mr. Angusson,' said the secretary, as if it were all in the day's work (which to a certain extent it was). 'Will that be all?'

Angusson banished her with a busy nod, and came round the desk as if he had only that minute remembered about Lottie. 'My dear Mrs. Osgood,' he said effusively, 'forgive me keeping you waiting so long! We really weren't expecting a sudden rush of 'phone calls like this! Will you have this chair? Good afternoon, Mr. Middleton.' He raised an inquiring eyebrow at Robin.

'This is Mr. Gardner, the author,' Lottie explained abruptly. 'I wanted him around.'

'How do you do?' said Angusson, with a frost-nipped smile. 'I'm very——'

'Now, let's get this straight,' said Lottie, riding over him rough-shod, 'before we talk any business! I don't want you to think, Mr. Angusson—nor you, Mr. Meadowsweet!—that I'm an enthusiastic amatooor that doesn't know her theatre! As a matter of fact, Ben Hecht once said to me, "Mrs. Osgood, you are not a member of the theatrical profession—you *are* the Theatre!" Back in the States, that was—you wouldn't know, but I've been an actress myself, and I've never lost my touch with the theatre, as Mr. Middleton here will tell ya! I ran my own company once, produced the plays, played the leads, and played *every* big theatre in the States! I've loved the theatre all my life, passionately! I've *lived* for it, *suffered* for it! It's not just a flair! My *Soul* is in the theatre! When I was still a child, Mr. Angusson, not more'n fourteen, I knew Juliet—the whole part!' She paused a moment for breath, and Robin had time to note her effect on Angus-

son and Meadowsweet. Angusson sat very still, and Meadowsweet sat a little forward with his mouth slightly ajar (cigar adroop), and his eyes were glued to Lottie in unwilling fascination. Then Angusson, having the stronger will of the two, shook himself, as one coming out of a trance, and shot a glance of bewildered reproach at the Middleton.

'You see,' said the Middleton, skipping in ahead of Lottie's fresh cloud-burst. 'Mrs. Osgood wants to produce plays for the love of it rather than just to make money——'

'I'm not saying I don't wanna make money!' Lottie denied loudly. 'I'd be crazy! I'll have you boys know I'm sufficient of a business woman not to throw my money away; but I wanna put on woith-while plays, beautiful plays, plays with a Message, instead of the slushy clap-trap that's going on everywhere at the moment! I wanna show London how a play *oughta* be put on! There's no organization in the Theatre here! No authority! No schedool! When I was in Noo York——'

'Mr. Meadowsweet and Mr. Angusson feel very much as you do,' the Middleton put in soothingly, for Meadowsweet's eyes were getting wider and wider. 'That's why I suggested they should——'

'—When I was in Noo York,' Lottie continued, with the inexorable purpose of a saw-mill cutting through plank. 'I went regularly to *every* production on Broadway! *They* knew how to put a play on, Mr. Meadowsweet, Mr. Angusson! Team work! Speed! Slickness! That's what the London theatre needs! Team work! I met Lubitsch in Hollywood!'

'Yes, but——' said Angusson, which was all he could get in, and lucky to do that.

'That's why I'm going into the Theatre, gentlemen! Here and in Noo York. I may work with Lubitsch later. I shall discover noo talent! I shall make actors in a night!'

The Middleton raised his eyebrows gently.

'And writers! The London theatre's let her writers

go to seed! I'm gonna change all that! *All on it!* She swept her gaze once round the office, Boadicea triumphant, and then sat down with such swiftness that Meadowsweet jumped nervously and bit through his cigar. 'Now we can talk business,' she added tersely. 'I gather you're prepared to present this play?'

'Well, now,' said Angusson measuredly, back in the shallow end again; 'before we go into——'

'Yes or no?' said Lottie sharply.

Angusson winced.

'Well, yes,' he said unwillingly. But there are certain stipulations——'

'How many?' rapped Lottie. 'Let's hear 'em!'

'When we present a play to the public,' said Angusson with dignity, 'it has to conform to certain standards——'

'Say, listen!' Lottie interrupted earnestly. 'This production's gonna be the biggest thing that evur hit London, Mr. Angusson! It's gonna knock it unconscious! And if you don't wanna take my word for it, that'd be just too bad! I'll go somewhere else!'

'It's not a question of that!' Angusson returned hastily. 'It is simply that if we undertake to act for you we must have a certain amount of security. Meadowsweet Productions do not cheese-pare, Mrs. Osgood, when they present a play. We spend freely if we think the play is worth doing at all.'

'Did I say anything about crimping the backing?' demanded Lottie. 'When I undertake to do a thing I do it just a hundred per cent. better than any one else could do it! Get *that*!'

'Then,' said Angusson, getting it, 'may I suggest that as a token of good faith we bank an advance to the credit of the production — say three thousand pounds——'

'Make it four! No! Six!' said Lottie crisply. 'Gimme a pen! I'll write the cheque now!'

Meadowsweet closed his eyes and leant back quietly. Angusson, to all intents and purposes unmoved, un-

screwed his pen and handed it across to Lottie with old-world courtesy, but his pulse fluttered.

'Mr. Meadowsweet will draw up a contract this evening and let you have it first thing to-morrow morning,' he said serenely. 'I then suggest that we meet as soon as we've been able to rent a suitable theatre—'

'I want Drury Lane!' said Lottie immediately. 'Or the Palace, or the Hippodrome or the Alhambra or the Coliseum, but nothing smaller!'

This upset Angusson more than he showed, but he kept civil.

'This play is hardly a musical spectacle, Mrs. Osgood,' he said gently, 'and at the moment all five of those theatres are in use. Will you leave it to my partner and me to get the best available theatre?'

'O.K.!' said Lottie. 'But it better be the best! Even if we have to buy out whoever's in it!'

When it was all over and the Middleton had departed with brief benedictions outside the office to keep tryst with an impatient and suspicious Agatha Penn, Lottie led the way to a massive Rolls-Royce that lay at anchor a little way down the street.

'Cute, ain't it?' she demanded. 'They had a blue one, but I liked this one better. Come on back to the hotel for a drink. I wanna have a lil' talk with you.'

A chauffeur sprang to life as they approached. He whipped open the door and saluted as Lottie manoeuvred herself in, and then covered them both with a large fur rug and trotted round to the driver's seat at the double. Lottie picked up a tube and said, 'Home, Fred,' and the chauffeur inclined his head slightly to show that his receiving set was working properly, and that he had heard and the Rolls glided silently away, watched with envy and other feelings by Angusson and Meadowsweet from the windows of Meadson Ltd.

For once Lottie showed no desire to prattle and lay back passive, and after a short silence Robin said a little awkwardly: 'Mrs. Osgood, I would like you to know

how very grateful I am about the play. It's hard to know how to put it, when it's such an important thing and you're risking so much money——'

'Skip it!' said Lottie cheerily. 'I wouldn't be doin' it if it didn't give me a kick! Whatcha think of those two old stooges up in that attic? Say, did I shake 'em when they found they got me all wrong? Wouldn't trust 'em further than I could push a sick elephant. That Angusson guy talks like he thinks it makes sense, but Meadowsweet's a horse-blanket. I want ya to know something, Robin. I'm a friend of yours. Get it? I like you a whole lart. You're sincere and arnest. I haven't met a guy like you in years. I wanna do things for ya, because I wanna see you get your break! Maybe you're scared ya play'll flop and I'll set up a moan? Well, I'll tell ya something! That play's gonna go over big! I know! I knoo when you read it me; and so does Doug, or he'da laid off ya when you didn't fall for the welcome written on his mat! I believe in ya, Robin, and I want you to look on me as a friend, and I mean it! And look—anything you say about the play goes, see? I want it done the way *you* want it. I promise that, here an' now, Robin, here an' now, but just as a favour to me, don't hand Doug the bum's rush on account of pursonal grievances. He's a darn good actor, whatever he does in a bed, and he's that keen to play I'd hate to see him slide out on his ear!'

Robin sat stunned, and tried to realize the import of Lottie's chatter.

Anything he said about the play went.

She wanted it done the way he wanted it. That meant he was in control of it. That meant he could do what he liked (except sack the Middleton) and have whom he liked in the cast. It meant that he was more important than Meadowsweet and Angusson. With a sudden rush the significance of it swept him up in the air and made him want to kick his heels with delight. It meant that Diana could play the heroine's sister!

He was going to be able to give Diana her first job!

Diana was going to play in his play!

The Rolls-Royce drew up in front of the Ritz, and a commissioner was advancing to open the door. He wanted to leap out and run all the way to Ebury Street and tell Diana what had happened, and that she was going to play the heroine's sister, but he restrained himself with an effort and followed Lottie meekly into the hotel.

Up in the suite, when she had popped away and popped back again in a complete change of attire, and had volleyed and thundered for champagne, he suddenly remembered Christopher Lovell.

'Could I choose my own producer?' he asked tentatively.

'Sure!' said Lottie. 'Gielgud or Guthrie? Both, if you like!'

'It's some one not quite as important,' said Robin, a little nervously. 'But he's very good. Christopher Lovell.'

'Never heard of him,' said Lottie immediately. 'What's he done?'

'Oh, a lot. I could bring him round to meet you, if you liked,' said Robin earnestly. 'You'd like him, I know you would. And I'd feel much happier with some one I knew understood the play as well as he did.'

'O.K. I'll look him over,' said Lottie. 'And Robin. Maybe you needn't mention to Doug yet awhile what I said about me being a friend of yours and that what you say goes, ha? Maybe it'd pique him, and none of us wants that? What sort of a dump do ya park in?'

'Do I——?' asked Robin with a wrinkled brow.

'Where ja live? I mean, what sort of flat is it?'

'Weil, it isn't exactly a flat,' Robin admitted unwillingly. 'It's rather more a sort of bed-sitting-room.'

'A lodging house?' asked Lottie, scandalized.

'It's a very *large* bed-sitting-room,' said Robin hastily.

'You live in one room!' was all that Lottie made return. 'Land sakes, it's unsanitary!'

'I'm very happy in it,' Robin returned defensively.

'Do you realize that in a month's time you'll be a poisonality? A celebrity? That you'll have to enner-tain? You can't throw a dinner-party in a lodging house room! We gotta change all that! You gotta have a flat in Mayfair, and a car! Not another word! You gotta! Leave it to me! I'll fix it in no time!'

Robin gazed at her aghast.

'But I don't *want* a flat in Mayfair!' he said in woe. 'Nor a car!'

'Why not?' boomed Lottie swiftly.

'Because I—because I—well, I couldn't *afford* it!' said Robin desperately.

'You don't have to afford anything!' Lottie assured him promptly. 'I'll do all the affording! They're just things you *gotta* have—simple essentials!' She became suddenly earnest. 'I *want* to give them to you, Robin! I want you to be happy. I've always wanted to find some one like you—some one different! You're something noo and faithful an'—an' *splendid*, Robin! I knoo—the moment I set eyes on you, though. I'm a clever woman, Robin. You know that, don't you? People think I'm a dumb cluck because I spend money the way I wanna; but I guess I know when any one's only after my dough, just as I know when any one's a straight and decent guy, like you,' She planted herself with such force on the other end of the sofa that Robin was bounced sharply into the air and back again, and after a short tussle tucked her legs under her (as a gesture of eternal youth) and surveyed him intensely. 'I'm a lonely woman, Robin! You'll never know how lonely! Lonely, lonely, lonely!' she said dramatically, for no apparent reason.

'I'm sorry,' said Robin, feeling something was expected of him, and growing steadily hotter behind the ears at every new peep into Lottie's soul.

'That's why I want you to let me give you a flat an' a car, Robin,' she added persuasively, with an expression

on her face that had once worked wonders with Barney Schwartz, but conveyed nothing to any one else.

Robin moved uncomfortably and looked at his knees.

'It's very kind of you,' he said at last; 'but I still wouldn't like a flat. Not if I couldn't go in at the door and look round and feel that I'd earned the money that it cost myself.' He looked up at her apologetically. 'Things you haven't worked to get can't be much fun—not inside, where it counts. At least, I wouldn't think so; I don't think. Though it's very kind of you indeed, Mrs. Osgood.'

'Ah, gee!' said Lottie exasperated. 'Do I have to go on askin' ya to call me Lottie?'

'I like calling you Mrs. Osgood better,' said Robin unhappily.

'It's too stiff! Kinda stuck-up! I'm not *used* to being treated respectful!' Lottie complained. 'Still, let it pass! Will ya stay to supper and come on dancing with Tullio and me?'

This took Robin ten minutes to get out of without giving umbrage, but he did it, and arrived back home just after Diana.

He found her standing in the middle of the room with a letter in her hand, and when he bobbed his head at it interrogatively, she handed it to him without a word, and then sat down with her hands in her lap and waited while he read it. It was from Mrs. Bannock.

'Dear Diana,' it ran, '*the enclosed letter arrived from Garstin by last post. We feel you should see it before we discuss anything. Your uncle is coming up to London tomorrow, and do please try to understand that whatever we decide to do is because we want to do the best we can for you.*'

Robin whipped it aside and began Garstin's letter with a growing excitement of anger.

'Dear Ma,' it began, '*If you lose any sleep over this letter, kindly remember that it was only written because you*

nag me so often to let you know how Diana is getting on—not because I like shoving my thumb in family affairs that don't concern me particularly. I dare say she's told you about a young man called Robin Gardner who has a room on the floor above hers, and that she's got pretty thick with him. I haven't said anything before because I had no proof, and I liked to give her the benefit of the doubt, but it's turned out that they're more than just friends. To be explicit, they're living together, and it's not quite the secret they think it. I don't know what line you and the padre are thinking of taking about it, but I suggest in all humbleness that Diana isn't really a bad lot, and that if you got her away from London she'd get over it quick enough. If you want my advice, I should write to Diana and simply say you can't afford to keep up the Course, without touching on any other questions, and get her back home. It'll save embarrassing scenes. I certainly don't advise coming to London and dragging her away by force, unless you want to fan the flames instead of putting 'em out. Sorry if this comes as a sad surprise. Yours as ever, Garstin.'

He conquered his first white rage and desire to slay, and knelt down by the gas-fire, and burned the letter to ashes. It made him feel a little better, and he moved round and knelt beside Diana and took her hands.

'It's not something that can't be put straight,' he said gently. 'Don't let it make you unhappy, Diana. Don't let it make you unhappy.'

Diana looked at him dumbly for a moment, and then gave a little quick sigh and held his hands tightly. 'I don't really believe it yet,' she said at last. 'I'd only just read it when you came.' She leant forward and rested her forehead against Robin's. 'I can't realize Uncle Sharman believing in it enough to come to London. It means they think we *would*—'

She broke off, and Robin moved a little closer and nursed her head against his shoulder and stroked her hair softly.

'They can't take you away from me,' he said steadily. 'No one can. And it doesn't matter what they think.'

'They can't hurt you. You're not to let them hurt you. I love you, Diana—my dearest, my sweet. I'll look after you always and always. They can't take you away from me. I love you.'

He felt Diana hold him closer, and pressed his face against her hair, so that little stray curls tickled him. 'If they still believe it after your uncle's been here, you don't ever need to think about it again. They give you an advance on plays, and we'll just go out to a registrar and be married, without telling any one, except my people, who won't mind, and it wouldn't matter if they did, and everything'll be all right, only please don't be unhappy about it, Diana, my darling, because I can't bear seeing you unhappy.'

He waited a little, and then gently tilted her chin until she looked up into his eyes, and with a new possessive tenderness kissed her very softly on the lips. 'I love you,' he said again, in a whisper.

'And I love you,' Diana whispered back.

'Then nothing else matters—does it?'

Diana shook her head.

'And you're not unhappy any more?'

She shook her head again, and then snuggled her head back on to his shoulder.

'It wasn't about me that I was unhappy,' she said into his coat collar. 'It was their thinking anything unkind about some one I—love so much.'

This moved Robin so much that he had to wait a little before he could speak again.

'But they've never seen me. They might quite like me, really,' he said at last.

'Of course they would!'

'Then they won't take you away.'

'Oh, Robin!' said Diana. 'Oh, Robin! Oh, darling, darling Robin! Oh, I feel so relieved! I've been such a fool about it! Do you get terribly impatient with me sometimes? Oh, Robin, I was so frightened, for a while! Oh, Robin, I do love you so!'

'Anybody in?' came Christopher's voice from the

outer regions, followed at once by a sharp rat-tat on the door. 'And don't be afraid to say no!'

'Oh, gosh; Christopher! I forgot!' said Robin, as Diana scrambled to her feet and fled to the mirror to see if she was at all presentable. 'Mrs. Osgood says he can produce *Soft Laughter*.'

'She *didn't*!' cried Diana excitedly, whirling round from the mirror. 'Oh, how *grand*!' She ran across to the door and flung it wide. '*Christopher*! You're going to produce the play! Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it marvellous? Oh, I'm so glad!'

'I'm *what*?' Christopher inquired, as he was dragged joyously across the threshold. 'Hullo, Robin! What's this about a play?'

'Robin, tell him! I only heard this minute! Mrs. Osgood says you can produce *Soft Laughter*.'

'Your play?' asked Christopher blankly. 'Me produce it? Mrs. Osgood? Sorry, I can't connect up. De brain he notta work. Say it all again; very quietly.'

So Robin told him of the Osgood pledge, and asked him if he could possibly come with him the next morning and meet her, and Christopher thought he very possibly could, and went on to recall the time when he was just about to sign the contract to write the book and music of an operetta for Drury Lane and it all suddenly changed to a public ward in St. George's Hospital and three nurses were trying to hold him down, which was the first inkling he had that the Austin had interfered with a Belisha Beacon and thrown him through the plate-glass window of a circulating library, twopence a volume, no deposit. 'Which means,' he concluded simply, 'that just as I scrape and make curtsies to the Lady Osgood, a policeman'll announce in a deep bass voice that I'll get my licence suspended if I live.'

'And there's something else!' Robin broke in. 'I'm to be allowed to choose my cast! You know the part of the heroine's sister?'

'No,' admitted Christopher, 'but I will when I've read it.'

'Oh, my goodness!' Diana exclaimed. 'Robin, he hasn't read the play!'

'Gosh!' said Robin incredulously. 'Haven't you? I've still got the manuscript. I'll fetch it this minute!' And he galloped out of the room and tore up the stairs.

Diana wriggled into a corner of the divan and beamed contentedly at Christopher. 'I'm so glad about this,' she said happily. 'It'll help to make up for things, won't it?'

'Don't forget I've still got to be approved,' Christopher reminded her. 'There's every chance that after one look she'll have the butler give me my hat.'

'But she won't! Oh, Christopher, I *know* things are starting to come right for you!'

He looked searchingly at her for a few seconds, and then rubbed his ear thoughtfully and took out a cigarette. 'You know, it's rather affecting, your being as pleased as that because I may get a job,' he said, paying meticulous care to the tapping of his cigarette. 'It awakens old ambitions. Not that they'll do anything more than turn over on to the other side and go to sleep again, muttering; but it reflects great credit on your kindness to your fellow-beings.' He felt for a match without result, and then knelt down beside the gas-fire and picked up the box Robin had left there. 'Hullo!' he added. 'Bonfire been going on here?'

'Oh, *that*,' she said, a little flatly. 'Yes.'

'A Bad Thing?' inquired Christopher, noticing her sudden fall in spirits.

'Garstin.'

'Oh!' said Christopher, relaxing. 'Then I shouldn't call it exactly epoch-making. What was it? An apology or rude words off a wall?'

'Just something he wrote to my aunt and uncle—about Robin and me.'

'You know, I knew I did wrong at the time,' said Christopher decisively. 'There was a moving van passing as I threw him out. I should have chucked him under it. Did the uncle and aunt attach much import to it?'

'Uncle Sharman's coming up to London specially.'

'Not so good. When?'

'To-morrow.'

'Well, you can always call in Witness Number One. Me. And not even Benito Mussolini could discover guile in Robin's fair countenance, so I shouldn't worry too much about it. I must see about getting another sock at Garstin some time, on account.'

Here Robin arrived noisily, having run the manuscript to earth in the bottom drawer of the dressing-table, where Mrs. Wallace had hidden it craftily for the love of the thing.

'It's all there,' he explained, 'and I'm sorry about not having a typewritten script for you. Will you be able to make sense of it?'

Christopher thumbed it through with a critical eye.

'It looks fairly legible,' he granted at last. 'Oke. I'll go straight home and read it now. What time do I meet you to-morrow, and where?'

'Say half-past twelve at the Ritz? If not, I'll telephone you in the morning.'

'Half-past twelve at the Ritz it is,' said Christopher efficiently, and rose to his feet. 'For now, farewell and many thanks, and I'll see myself out.'

§

At twelve-thirty they met at the Ritz as plotted, and ascended to Lottie's suite directly, and in the lift Robin said a little casually, 'Did you like it?' and nodded at the manuscript, which was bulging out Christopher's pocket and looked vaguely as if he had brought his lunch with him, and Christopher said he liked it, but that there were certain things he wanted to talk about if anything came of the plumbing of Lottie. Small things, but important, and they would tighten up the play a great deal without interfering with its original conception, if Robin knew what he meant. Here the lift stopped and they got

out and presented themselves at Lottie's door, and were let in by the maid, and there in the ante-room were the Middleton and Garstin Bannock.

With a sinking feeling Robin introduced Christopher to the Middleton.

'How do you do?' said the Middleton with formal graciousness. 'I believe you and Mr. Bannock know each other already?'

'Yeah,' said Garstin, not getting up. 'Always running across each other. Hullo, Robin!'

There was a pause.

'Garstin's taking over the publicity of the play,' said the Middleton at last.

'Newspaper publicity,' Garstin corrected lazily. 'The Jobs for Pals Department's going to need new floor-space in no time at all. How's Diana, Robin?'

'I wonder if you'd come outside a minute?' said Robin, with a restrained light of battle in his eye.

'Don't wonder another minute,' Garstin exhorted him promptly. 'I shouldn't dream of it. If you're set on wreaking vengeance, you'll have to wait till I can walk again. Or would you strike a cripple?'

'I hardly touched you,' said Christopher, disclaiming credit. 'I've done nothing but wish I had ever since.'

'Ah, don't reproach yourself. I've seen the extent of the danger,' the Middleton put in consolingly. 'I'd give him a fortnight's convalescence, Robin. They would in Harley Street.'

'Nobody loves me,' Garstin remarked sadly. 'Everybody hates me. I'd go into the garden and eat worms. only it'd make me a cannibal.'

There was another pause.

'Meadowsweet and Angussou have got a theatre, by the way. Did you know?' the Middleton reopened, mentioning it (but you are never going to hear which it was). 'Very good one, actually, though I wish we could have got the Lyric or the Apollo. They're going to start casting after lunch. Meadowsweet's suggested approaching Komisarjevsky to produce,' and his eyes

fell, in passing on Christopher and narrowed slightly, 'though it's flying a little high. We ought to be into rehearsal a week from now, with luck.'

Then the door opened and Lottie came in, looking radiant. In a way.

'Aha there, Doug!' she opened up. 'How ya. Robin! Who's the stooges?'

'Garstin Bannock,' the Middleton introduced, 'Mrs. Osgood. He's on a paper, Lottie, and a Dramatic Critic in his own right, so I thought you ought to talk to him about the press publicity.'

Garstin, who had stood up carefully during the speech, gave greeting.

Lottie looked him up and down searchingly without finding what she had been searching for, and said: 'Pleased to meetcha, Mr. Garstin!' and bounced at Christopher. 'And you?' she inquired with more warmth.

'Christopher Lovell,' said Robin, 'Mrs Osgood.'

'Lovell, Lovell, Lovell,' said Lottie rapidly. 'Where did I hear your name before? Don't tell me! I got it! You're the guy Robin wants to produce the show! O.K., it's yours. Thousand dollars enough? Come on round to my manager's this afternoon, and I'll have them tie you up, but sit down now and have a drink!' She lifted her voice so that the glasses on the sideboard sang with the vibration. 'Eloise! Have 'em bring champagne—at once!'

'But, Lottie,' said the Middleton with well-assumed lightness, 'aren't you moving a little too fast? I'm sure even Mr. Lovell doesn't expect to be engaged without convincing you he's the right man for this particular play——'

'When I make up my mind about anything, I make it up like *that*!' Lottie returned regally, snapping her fingers in the air twice, to prove the first was no fluke. 'And I'm nevur wrong, Doug Middleton! Mr. Lovell'll produce this play better'n any one you could find in this dump in a month o' Sundays!'

In the split second before the Middleton's flood of

unwise rebuke broke loose, Garstin slipped in and saved him. 'I think you're perfectly right, Mrs. Osgood,' he said quickly. 'I've seen a lot of Mr. Lovell's work, and I've a great respect for his strength and direct attack. He's what I'd call a producer with punch.'

The wisdom of Garstin's move became apparent at once. Lottie thawed perceptibly and bestowed a flash of fine teeth upon him.

'There ya, ya see, Doug?' she flung out triumphantly. 'Mr. Bollick bears me out! I see I gart yo wrong, Mr. Bollick! Just shows how deceptive appearances are—— What I mean is, you're the sort of live guy I want on the publicity, Mr. Bollick, and the job's yours! Not another word! Eloise, what's stopping that champagne?'

'That's very kind of you indeed, Mrs. Osgood,' Garstin made return, with great civility; 'and if I may, the name is Bannock and not Bollick, not that it really matters at all.'

'There!' said Lottie, 'trust me to get it all balled up! Say, will ya excuse me while I round up that champagne?' And she disappeared into the inner chamber boding doom to the Ritz wine-waiter.

The Middleton allowed a few seconds of mute but hostile contemplation to slip by, and then laughed and tapped his cigarette and said: 'But of course it's quite ludicrous! You aren't going to accept the job, Lovell, surely?'

'Yes, he is,' said Robin, without any hesitation.

'Gentlemen,' Garstin put in simply, 'also members of the Opposition. I would like to suggest—quite humbly—that if we are to work together, this awful hatred must go, or at least be shelved, or chaos will ensue.'

'Chaos'll ensue anyway, as long as you're in this production,' said Robin with spirit. 'I think you ought to tell Mrs. Osgood you made a mistake.'

'That, good Gardner, I could not do,' Garstin returned equably. 'I need the salary.'

'Then I will,' said Robin flatly.

'You forget. When Mrs. Osgood makes up her mind about a thing, she makes it up like *that*, and she's never wrong,' said Garstin gently, 'or am I?'

The Middleton, with an air of strict impartiality, seconded him. 'I have found,' he remarked, 'that you can make Lottie do pretty nearly anything you want provided you let her think it's all been her own idea; but I've never heard her admit she was wrong once she's committed herself. Looks to me as if Lovell and Bannock were here for keeps, unless she thinks better of it without assistance. Which she may do, of course.'

'Yeah,' said Garstin, 'and Parliament may dissolve the Censor. Only it can't. We're here for keeps all right, all right.' And all that Robin could think of was that Diana wouldn't be able to play the heroine's sister after all, and that instead of being something exciting, the production of *Soft Laughter* was going to be fraught with miseries.

They lunched with Lottie, which was painful enough in itself, and then descended five strong on Meadowsweet and Angusson in the afternoon.

Angusson was frankly damped when Christopher and Garstin were presented as producer and publicity manager, having promised both positions to cousins of his wife (though not in writing) and hinted broodingly at unconstitutional proceedings and their demoralizing influence on high-class productions; but as the signing of the contract was the major hurdle before him, he put aside his pique and set about explaining the clauses to Lottie in a way which would not only satisfy her but conceal the fact that all the clauses were neutralized by the last; which gave him complete control of Lottie's largesse; and with the help of the Middleton (who whispered loudly to Lottie that she ought to have it approved by a solicitor in the first instance) had it signed immediately.

At the best of times there is no more chuckle-witted spectacle in the world than responsible executives casting a play, but when you throw in Lottie for good measure, the thing becomes fantastic; and where in the ordinary

way the playwright's idea of his characters is treated 'with gentle pity and the producer asked only to speak when addressed, Robin's suggestions were ignored and Christopher's shouted down. All this served to confuse Lottie to such an extent that she crushed Robin and Christopher out of the conversation time and again under the impression that she was putting Angusson and the Middleton in their places. As the afternoon progressed the altercations became steadily more heated and confused, and at last, when Robin was near to tears of sheer desperation and Christopher was repeating over to himself that he had to have the money and couldn't throw his job back in Lottie's teeth, much as he wanted to, she leant back, and in a voice of thunder announced that the cast was now settled, that not one word would be altered, and ordered Angusson to read it out.

Angusson breathed half mutinously through his nose and rattled off the names in a voice strange to him.

'And when can I see 'em?' asked Lottie.

'At the first rehearsal,' Angusson answered long-sufferingly.

'No,' said Lottie with ominous calm. 'This afternoon.'

Meadowsweet gave a soft whinny of pain from his corner of the room, but these things go for nothing.

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' said Angusson, white and drawn.

Which was the only time Angusson ever told Lottie Osgood that anything was impossible.

At ten to seven, when the last of the cast had been subjected to her eagle-eyed scrutiny and three of them sacked on sight, she gathered up her trappings and prepared to depart.

'Comin' back to the hotel?' she asked Robin. 'Want to talk to you, so don't try to think out slick excuses. It's important.'

'But I——' Robin began, and then stopped because it was 'out of the question to tell Lottie about Diana and the Rev. Sharman Bannock, and no other excuse

presented itself for the moment. 'Well, would you let me go home first and change and then come back later?'

'Expect you half-past nine,' Lottie rapped back, and swirled away through the ante-room.

Angusson gazed after her retreating bulk with distended pupils, and then leant back and shut his eyes.

'Give me Hitler,' was all he said, but it came from the heart.

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The events of the day had been more than enough, while they lasted, to keep Robin from worrying whether the Rev. Sharman was going to take Diana away or not; but on the bus back to Ebury Street his fears and doubts came back with a rush, and his weary imagination visualized a demoniac Rev. Sharman towering over him with drawn umbrella while Diana packed prior to going out of his life for ever; and was so wrapped up in it all that he never realized Christopher had come on the bus with him, and was sitting beside him and had paid his fare, until they were quite near Hyde Park Corner.

'Thought my testimony might come in handy,' said Christopher sympathetically, as soon as Robin became aware of him. 'I'll sit in the hall or somewhere till called, and just silently steal away if not wanted.'

'Thanks,' said Robin simply, and paused for a minute and then said, 'I don't suppose there's any need to worry, really—but it's hard not to. It was such a *dirty* trick.'

'This production,' Christopher remarked, to take his mind on to other things, 'is going to be very interesting, I should say, in its way, that it'll probably be one of the most interesting productions in the history of the London theatre. One to look back upon all one's life, as it were.'

'It'll be a failure,' Robin admitted gravely, 'and I shan't make any money out of it; but if I can't come through this I'll never come through anything; like a test-case.'

'Hm,' said Christopher, gazing out of the bus; 'it's not a bad way to look at it. But all the same, you could have fallen into kindlier hands for your test-case. You'll have to be plenty tough to come through this without scars on your soul.' He tore the bus-tickets carefully down the middle and plaited them. 'Robin, this is hard for me to say, but I'd feel a lousy sort of swine if I didn't. It's not a good play.'

Robin allowed no expression to come into his face and betray him, and nodded without looking round.

'But the one after this will be,' Christopher added. 'And I'm not just saying that as a sop. I don't know what sort of a mess this'll land you in, but I know you'll get out of it again and go on writing. Maybe it'll give you something comic to write a play about, in which case it'll have had its uses. But don't let people like these warp your sense of perspective. They did mine, and I can't get the damn thing to work any more! The thing is to keep your mind fixed on the decent qualities of the people you come across—because even the decent people have rotten qualities as well, and if you didn't, you'd end up by losing your belief in everything. That's my credo—though Gawd knows I haven't done much about it myself. This, I believe, is where we get off?'

They walked the length of Ebury Street without speaking, and found Miss Abernethy in the hall.

'Miss Shand's uncle's heer,' she greeted Robin, 'and Miss Shand asked me to tell you as sunc as ye came in.'

'Can I come and play with you, Abbie?' asked Christopher endearingly.

'Well, I'm aboot to make a cup of tea if ye'd care to join me,' said Miss Abernethy, flattered and all but kittenish; 'though it'll have to be in the kitchen, the sitting-room being loaned out till eight-thirty to Number Seven for sherry and biscuits.'

'That's unco hospeetabul o' ye, Mees Aburnethy!' said Christopher heartily. 'And I tak greet pleasure in acceptin'. Shall we awa doon, ma bonnie? Hoots-

toots tae ye, Robin, ye skeplie ! I'll be on Abbie's lap it wanted !'

And away he went with Miss Abernethy on his arm, which she adored, and Robin ascended the stairs two at a time, and slowed down as he reached Diana's door and paused to make sure he looked as respectable as possible and then knocked, and Diana opened the door almost immediately and said, 'Oh, I'm so glad you've come at last !' looking a little as if she wanted to cry, and took his hand and led him into the room and said, 'Uncle Sharman, this is Robin Gardner,' and a very benign old gentleman with white hair rose and held out his hand and said, 'How do you do ?' in a voice that showed at once that he was as shy of meeting Robin as Robin was of meeting him, but that he liked what he saw, and then they sat down and talked of this and that with great constraint until used to each other, and then the Rev. Sharman said, 'I believe Diana showed you the letter Garstin wrote us, Mr. Gardner,' and Robin said yes, she had ; and felt exceedingly uncomfortable, though conscious that he had no cause to ; and looked at Diana to show that he wasn't feeling uncomfortable at all.

'Well, it's not what I came up to London about,' the Rev. Sharman proceeded, a little unexpectedly. 'It came at an unfortunate time, but I want you to know that I never put any great belief in it from the first—and now that Diana's told me exactly what did happen I'm only sorry my son wrote it in the first place—but what I wanted to explain was that—I've already told this to Diana, of course ; before you came—a rather unforeseen thing has occurred—to be precise, my retirement—we weren't expecting it, you see, my wife and I—not for another two or three years, anyway ; but now it's the end of the year, and it means, among other less important things, that we shan't be able to help Diana finish her Course.' Here he paused unhappily and put his pince-nez back in his case and then took them out again and put them back on his nose. 'I *had* intended to tell Diana when she came home for the holidays, because I thought it would be kinder than writing it ; but after Garstin's

letter, which I regret very deeply—very deeply—I felt the sooner every one knew where they were the better. My wife was a little disturbed, you see. I'm afraid she puts more value upon Garstin's letters than I do—which is quite understandable in a mother, of course,' he added hastily, and coughed deprecatingly, and then went on. 'I should have gone back by the six o'clock train, but I wanted to wait and meet you, knowing it would probably mean as much to you as it does to Diana, and tell you how sorry I am about the whole affair. I wish there were some way of making it easier for you.'

Robin sat staring at him in blank dismay, and the Rev. Sharman, receiving no word from him, proceeded with lively sympathy.

'Diana has told me about your—I mean, it wouldn't be a complete separation—there are always week-ends, and any time you could get away we'd always be glad to make you as welcome as possible at the Vicarage. Please don't think I don't know how much it will mean—to both of you. I do. I'm so very, very sorry, Robin.'

For a moment no one spoke, and then Robin said: 'Miss Compton said Diana was one of the most promising people she had ever taught. In another year's time——' He broke off and looked miserably at Diana, who was doing her best to look as if it didn't really matter and not succeeding very well. 'I shall never really be anything important, but Diana *will*—it isn't just me that thinks it—they *all* do—and they wouldn't think it unless there wasn't any doubt about it!'

'We went into everything before you came, Robin,' said Diana quickly, and he knew that she had been hurt so much that it didn't hurt at all; and he quite openly took her hand in his and found that when he swallowed there was a lump in his throat and it stung his eyes to blink; and the Rev. Sharman, observing all this, rose with unusual abruptness and said he was going, and added something indistinct about a train, and how sorry he was about it all and dropped his umbrella, and begged Diana

not to come down to the door with him, but permitted it, and Robin was left alone.

On the front steps, the Rev. Sharman paused, and then patted Diana's hand apologetically and said: 'I feel as if I'd done something quite heartless and brutal'; and Diana said, 'Please you're not to, Uncle Sharman! I *do* understand—really I do!' and kissed him, and the Rev. Sharman patted her hand again and then saw a taxi and waved his umbrella and shouted 'Hi!' and was soon transported from her ken with a final 'Good-bye' from the window of the taxi as it turned down towards Victoria Station.

CHAPTER XIV

Revenge with Music

NOW, there is that in the character of Lottie Osgood which has still to be unveiled: her illogical hatred of women; and this is the place to do it, or at least as good a place as any other. It sprang, not from any great wrong done her by any particular woman (though she had once caught Barney Schwartz hitching up his trousers in Eliza's dressing-room in the interval before the ice-floe scene), but from a fixed and deep-rooted suspicion of potential rivalry. She allowed her young men every latitude except truck with other women. It was the one thing she never forgave. Lottie jealous was the fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, and a bigger, better Horseman than any of the other Four. Thus, when Robin was shown into her apartment later that same evening, having left Christopher to comfort Diana, and with a Great Resolve awaiting utterance, he little knew how near he was to danger.

'Mrs. Osgood,' he began at once and speaking with great rapidity and purpose, 'the other evening you said you wanted the play done the way I wanted it. Did you really mean it, Mrs. Osgood?'

'Why, sure!' said Lottie, beginning to bridle a little, having forgotten it completely. 'D'ya think I'd have said it otherwise?'

'Then please, *please* will you sack Garstin Bannock and let me give the part of the heroine's sister to a girl called Diana Shand, who's at the Fay Compton Studio of Dramatic Art and is a *brilliant* actress, and may have to give up the stage altogether because her people can't afford to keep her on there? I promise you she'll be as good as any one else in it—I *know* she will, because I've seen her do Phœbe in *Quality Street* and she can *act*, Mrs. Osgood!'

'Take it easy!' Lottie requested. 'One thing at a time, or I'll go nuts! Whatcha wanna sack Garstin Bannock for? Apart from him being a sawed-off runt, which he can't help? I like the guy! I'll do anything in reason, son, but I gotta know the reason, and as far as I can see, he's O.K. If he ain't I'll soon get wise to it, so how about laying off till then, ha? Not another word! That's settled! Now, about this dame. They cast the heroine's sister this afternoon. You heard 'em!'

'Yes, I know,' said Robin urgently; 'but it means her whole career, getting this job! She'd make enough to pay her fees next year, and it might lead to other jobs, and otherwise she'll have to leave at the end of the term and go back into the country—and that can't happen, Mrs. Osgood! It can't be allowed to happen! Not when it means her whole career at stake!'

'Any one else besides you think she's gotta career?' asked Lottie dryly.

'They *all* do, at the Studio! Oh, *please*, Mrs. Osgood! I'd do anything to be able to give her this job!'

'Slow down!' Lottie advised. 'You'll be committing yourself before you know it. Wait a minute and let me think it over. Help yourself to a drink—s'all over there. When can I see this dame?'

'I could ring her up and tell her to come round here straightaway,' said Robin, too eagerly.

'Yeah?' said Lottie. 'Ha!'

She half closed her eyes and leaned back.

'O.K.,' she said at last. 'You knew your onions when you brought along the Lovell guy. I'll take your word for it. Tell her the job's hers.'

'Oh, *gosh*!' said Robin incoherently. 'Oh, *gosh*, Mrs. Osgood, thank you!'

'Think nothing of it,' said Lottie casually. 'Think nothing of it.'

Which brings us, seeing that we are dealing with essentials, to the first rehearsal.

Make no mistake, though. With the casting of Diana for the heroine's sister Robin had all unwittingly given a hostage to Fortune (represented locally by Lottie), and much of the wrath to come sprang from it. Lottie had done this with her eyes open, for as we have said, she had flashes of intelligence, and this one was a bonanza. In the art of gentle blackmail Lottie knew no peers, provided she got the thing right at the beginning; so that when the Middleton furiously but privately told her that casting inexperienced little tarts in responsible parts was a hell of a fine way to court failure and the thing was iniquitous, Lottie replied by expressing complete confidence in Diana, and hinted that if the Middleton was going to start querying her judgment, there were plenty of young men who could play his part on their heads. Whereupon the Middleton calmed down at once and said that all he wanted to do was to protect Lottie from a possible flop, and Lottie said if it flopped it flopped and it was her flop and no one else's, so what the hell?

It was this that hardened the macadam of the Middleton's hate. Without Diana in the cast he might possibly have controlled the ravages of his unrequited emotions long enough to get through the first night without anything untoward in the way of a *fracas*; but with Diana not only in the cast but with two important scenes to play with him, an all-enveloping desire to see her and Robin dragged behind his chariot wheels obliterated everything else and set him surging with a wild lust to wreak havoc in their sanctimonious little lives, until he became so charged and super-charged with impatience

for revenge that he began to lose sleep and partially ruined his digestion, though on the surface he appeared more at ease and charming than ever before.

Behind him as a close ally came Garstin, whose rage at the failure of his letter was something faintly magnificent, and whose urge to be revenged had been sharpened like a slate-pencil and now squeaked for blood to be shed, provided some one else did the shedding.

The machinery of Tragedy, now oiled and set in motion, began to hum gently.

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When Robin and Diana arrived for the first rehearsal they found themselves in an empty theatre, with one batten and a top light on, and an Electrician peering from behind an apron-flat and the stage cat eyeing them calculatingly. It was all extremely subdued and ghostly, and a little mildewed. They sat on the two end chairs of a row that had been set across the stage. The cat walked up to see if it liked them, but repulsed Diana with hauteur when she tried to stroke it and walked away again at once. From down below the stage came muffled hammering, as if Burke and Hare were nailing some one up in a box, alive, and nobody was caring very much.

The auditorium swept away into shadow.

There was nothing real anywhere.

It was haunted by the wraiths of unsuccessful actors (who are snubbed in Heaven), and there was a smell of disinfectant and failure in the air.

The Electrician walked once round the apron-flat and said 'Mornin'' just as he was disappearing again, so that he was out of sight when they returned it, but bobbed up again almost immediately from behind a row-piece denoting shrub and confronted them in the open.

'*Soft Larfter*?' he suggested intuitively.

'Yes,' said Robin, warming a little.

'Notta bad tittle, *Soft Larfter*. Openin' second week

in September, aintcher? Not a bad tittle, *Soft Larfter*, It'll look good up on the bills, *Soft Larfter* will. I see Arsenal's wiped 'Uddersfield agine. Jus' shows you can't never tell. Yesterday, nobodyda thought it. T'day, starin' up at ye in black'n white in the piper. Still, that's 'ow it goes. Not that I follow it, mesek, mind you. Not in a seerious wy. Darts. That's me. Darts. Well, so long.' And he tipped his cap cheerfully and had slid behind the apron-flat again before they could say knife.

The theatre cat, who had watched all this attentively, now lay down upon one haunch and began spring-cleaning in an abandoned manner, and two people arrived in the Prompt Corner of the stage, one of whom Robin recognized as the Heroine's Father, and stood talking in modulated undertones. In a minute or two they were joined by the Heroine's Mother and the Butler, whereupon they all clustered together in a small bunch and developed the conversation, though without raising the modulated undertones in any way. This gave the impression that they had all just got back from a funeral and were waiting to be given cold ham and cooking sherry by the widow. Three more arrivals set up in opposition at the other end of the Prompt Corner, and the stage rustled with their mutters. By now it was so like a wake that Diana and Robin began to feel out of place for not knowing who it was that had died. The Electrician appeared again, this time by the 'Exit to Stage Door,' and one of the whisperers broke the thread of his text long enough to say 'Hullo, Charlie,' and nod (to which the Electrician nodded affably in return and tipped his cap and said 'Wottcheer'), and then picked up where he had left off, only louder, so that Diana and Robin were able to catch scraps of his conversation, which was how he had willed Meadowsweet and Angussan into giving him three pounds a week more than they had bargained for. This was drawing forth murmurs of approval and admiration from the others, who hadn't been able to will Meadowsweet and Angussan into doing anything at all.

From somewhere behind came a deafening crash and the tinkle of splintered glass, and every one stopped whispering and jumped; but the Electrician appeared almost at once with a reassuring smile and said 'It's only me,' and vanished again, and every one went on with their whispering again, and then Christopher arrived and greeted the two little groups pleasantly and was greeted pleasantly in exchange, and came across to Diana and Robin.

'Been here long?' he inquired cheerfully. 'I couldn't get the car to start, so I had to come by bus. Come on over and get friendly with the cast. Feeling nervous? Bit of a strain, the first reading. Can't expect to get much done, or anything, the first day.'

They accompanied him across to the Prompt Corner and were presented to the cast, who were polite without being effusive, and gave the impression of being very much on their guard and ready for any criticism the author might think fit to level at them. Every one was very much on their dignity and good manners, and said how much they liked the play, and had had the feeling when first reading it that it would be a success, and how sure they were that they were going to enjoy playing in it. Behind all this one sensed that they were a little undecided as to whether or not it was lowering to be produced by some one who wasn't particularly important and was generally known to be a failure, and whether it wasn't lowering to have a completely unknown child from a Dramatic School playing a part nearly as important as the Heroine's Mother (which put her on the same social level as the rest of the cast), and whether they ought to be too cordial to an author who was obviously exceedingly young and inexperienced and so far had no standing at all: for in the Theatre one is judged (and treated accordingly) by one's deeds of prowess and not one's qualities, and actors are terrified of showing their admiration of any one who has not been proved by general consensus to be worthy of it.

These timid, uncertain creatures were putty to the Middleton, who arrived at this moment and let his

sparkling personality have full play. His appearance, brought sunlight to the cast, who now felt themselves quite safe in releasing their admiration, as the Middleton had a successful play behind him; so they flocked about him and laughed loudly at his jokes, and beamed at him and listened with bated breath to every word that came from his lips. This sprang, not from sycophantic guile, but from an anxious desire to create a good impression on a potential source of employment, and there was no great malice in it. I mention this only that you may understand why they sided so cravenly with the Middleton after war was declared.

For the moment, however, the Middleton had no intention of declaring war, and contented himself with studious courtesy to every one, and was most charming to Diana and Robin, even to the extent of quitting his Fan Club and coming across to them and greeting Diana warmly.

'Well, neither of us ever expected we'd meet like this when I came down to Nivenhurst that holiday,' he said lightly, shaking her hand with every symptom of good will. 'Still, I said all along that the daughter of Lily Evans'd find her niche in the theatre!' and laughed. 'And I'm sure you'll be an enormous success.'

'Thank you,' said Diana, overcome and amazed.

'Did I hear you say Lily Evans?' asked the Heroine's Mother, incredulous. 'But I played with her for years! Are *you* Lily Evans's daughter? But of *course* you are—the *image* of her!' She heaved emotionally. 'Well, isn't it just history *repeating* itself—I mean, isn't it a coincidence? I never *dreamed* I'd be in a play with her daughter—and playing your mother too! It's *rather* sweet, isn't it?'

And the Butler remembered Lily Evans as well and unbent and became quite human, and the Middleton felt intensely irritated with himself for mentioning the thing at all; but Christopher gave an audible sigh of relief and began shuffling through the scripts and then with a *ta-ran-ta-ra-ra*! Lottie burst through the swing doors to the Stage Door and came thundering across the stage.

'Everybody here?' she volleyed loudly. 'Who isn't here? Morning all! Stage Manager! Where's the Stage Manager?' A shy little man crept out of the shadows and she seized on him. 'Everybody here, Stage Manager?'

Yes, Mrs. Osgood,' he said meekly.

'Then start!' commanded Lottie. 'Morning, Doug,' she added as she swept past him and seated herself in the middle of the stage with her back to the footlights. 'Come arn! — Whatcha waiting for? Mr. Lovell—you O.K.?'

'Act One,' said Christopher obediently, and after a little confused scuffling among scripts the bunch near the Prompt Corner sorted itself out, and three of them ventured warily into the middle of the stage and stood gazing pensively, like cows on seeing their first train, at Christopher.

'Never mind actual stage directions to-day,' said Christopher in a quiet voice, 'just read. We'll have actual positions of furniture chalked out to-morrow and work them in as we go along.'

'What's wrong with having them right now?' demanded Lottie at once. 'Sooner they know where they are the better! Stage Manager, get a piece of chalk!' This caused a break of four minutes while the Stage Manager hunted frantically for chalk, which he obtained eventually from a fragile old lady outside in the street who was chalking 'Why Not Try God?' on the wall of the theatre in capital letters; and after one or two more minor alarms and a false start, the first reading began again, and achieved seven minutes of uninterrupted flow before Lottie's voice shattered the hushed and reverent gloom.

'Make it snappy!' she exhorted earnestly. 'Put a bit o' pep into it! Give it Life! Mr. Lovell, come'n sit ovur here by me, so I can tell ya what I want!'

There was a scandalized silence from the cast, who thought this all very unseemly and regrettable and feared for their respectability; but Christopher pacifically fetched a chair and sat down next to Lottie, who from

then on poured criticism and helpful suggestions into his ear at the rate of two a minute. This saddled him with the Herculean task of listening to her remarks (lest one in fifty carry a grain of sense) and carrying on his work at the same time. Then the Middleton made his first entrance, reading with great smoothness and aplomb, and things speeded up a little. Lottie nodded approvingly and said 'M'hm,' under her breath, and 'That was slick,' and 'Atta boy!', and then it came to Diana's entrance, and she left Robin where they had been sitting at the corner of the stage and tiptoed to the chalk-mark with *Centre Door* written along it and waited for her cue, which the Middleton had to give her.

As it drew near the fluttering in her heart died down a little, and she felt less panic-stricken and was on the verge of regaining her repose when she heard the Middleton deliberately skip her cue and go on to the next one, which was addressed to the Heroine's Mother and which the Heroine's Mother had to redirect to her. The sudden horror of it paralysed her and she stood rooted to the chalk-line, looking desperately at Christopher for guidance, but Christopher was deep in a tussle with Lottie at the moment and had failed to notice the villainy afoot.

The Heroine's Mother returned the Middleton's cue, looked round foolishly for Diana and then stopped.

'Oh, Miss Shand!' said the Middleton clearly. 'You're supposed to be on-stage, I think. I'll just go back and give you your cue again, shall I?'

Lottie and Christopher looked up, and Diana felt herself blushing with self-consciousness and confusion and looking guilty. When she read her lines, she found that try as she might the words came out in flat monotone and the typewritten lines played gentle leap-frog and read back to front and twisted themselves out of all meaning so that every now and again she had to pause and struggle with them, and every time she paused she could see the Middleton's script swinging lazily in his hand, as if he were killing time, which made the pauses much longer and the monotone flatter and flatter, until

at last she was feeling so completely miserable and ashamed of herself that it took all her will not to throw the script on to the floor and run out of the theatre and never see any one again ; and then she became conscious of Christopher's gentle voice explaining to the Heroine's Mother that she hadn't got the character quite mellow enough and would she soften it down a little, and asking the Butler to make himself ten years younger and not be so stiff, and suggesting to the Middleton that the young composer in the play was much younger than he was reading him and less sure of himself ; and then he turned to Diana and said, ' You've got the feeling all right, Miss Shand. Don't make her any more positive than you're playing her now, but put just a little more volume into the ends of your lines. Otherwise you're doing fine.' And though she knew he was only saying it because he knew how nervous she was, she suddenly felt much happier, and read the rest of her part quite easily and was given a nod by Lottie as she went off at the end.

The first night was three weeks away.

The first week went by in comparative quiet, save that Lottie continued to lift the lid off Hades in the Meadson Ltd. offices on the question of scenery and costumes, and kept Christopher tottering on the brink of a nervous collapse by glueing herself to his side during every rehearsal, taking notes madly on scraps of paper, losing them, and then accusing the entire cast of having stolen them ; and insisting that every time a character sat down they should be standing up or alternately that every time they stood up they should be sitting down, and keeping up a running commentary on the people she didn't like in a voice that carried over fourteen rows of stalls and all but blew the scenery over.

The Middleton contented himself with holding up proceedings about once every twenty minutes while he satisfied himself (and everybody else) that the way he was doing a particular scene was as perfect as human art could make it, and had long and analytical dissertations with a barely patient Christopher across the footlights on

the terrific importance of stressing the syllables he wanted to as opposed to the ones he was told to, always adding virtuously. 'It's just that I want to get everything absolutely straight. So sorry I'm holding things up,' and then proceeded to hold things up all over again while he paced out the steps from one chair to another and debated with himself whether he looked finer standing with the left foot forward instead of the right, which is what I call primping, and nobody minds it from elderly actresses who had been Stars in their own rights for forty years and are petrified somebody might forget it if they behaved themselves, but which is downright maddening when done by young leading men.

The art of the producer being never to lose one's temper until all else has failed, Christopher struggled valiantly to humour him without losing hours of valuable time over problems that could have been settled in two lines of curt dialogue; but by the end of the first week a cold light of desperation began to steal into his eye every time the Middleton broke into some one's speech with 'Just a moment, please, darling,' and advanced down to the footlights and said, 'I say, Christopher. This next line of mine. How did you say you wanted it done? You remember I did it *this way*'—doing it—'and you said it didn't convey anything. The thing *is*, you see, I don't *feel* it your way. It's much more natural to do it *my way*—I can understand what I'm supposed to be doing if I do it my way, but when I do it the other way it doesn't feel *natural*—not to me, anyway.'

To which Christopher replied with inestimable patience, 'As long as it looks natural to an audience, I don't see why you should worry about the way it affects you personally.'

'But I *can't* do a thing if I don't understand why I'm doing it!' the Middleton insisted, as one pinked in the professional dignity. 'It wouldn't be sincere! I'd become conscious that I was just acting and everything'd collapse!'

Now this sort of thing is catching. Actors who ordinarily behave perfectly begin to feel slightly

neglected, and at once scratch about and find something in their own part to have a long analytical discussion about, and in no time at all the thing becomes a Board Meeting.

The Electrician, watching without prejudice from the wings beside Diana, said, 'The trouble with Mr. Middleton is, 'e's too 'igh-strung. Wot 'e needs is a pill like they give race-'orses, froo a choob.'

In vain Christopher sought a remedy for these new-found exhibitions of temperament. There was none.

The Middleton had demoralized the team-work, and what he left undone Lottie rushed in and completed with untiring thoroughness, though often meaning well. Christopher found himself unequal to the double strain, and thought more than once of handing in his resignation and admitting defeat; but he knew he was the only friend Diana and Robin had in the theatre, and was loth to throw them on the mercies of a new producer. Moreover, whatever shape the play had had was being deliberately distorted to fit the Middleton's own particular personality, and a new producer would either lie down and let the thing go the way the Middleton drove it or put up a fight and wreck the entire production; and looking at the thing practically he needed the two hundred pounds, so he stayed.

With the beginning of the second week the Middleton began to come out into the open. When playing his scenes with Diana he either rattled his lines off so quickly that he drowned the beginning and end of her speech in return, or dragged the scene so slowly that she lost the rhythm of her lines and fell back to the monotone again; and the moment he was off stage and in the wings she spent fruitful hours convincing the cast that she let down their scenes and showed them up to poor advantage, until one by one the cast admitted that he was absolutely right, and that they *did* feel the scenes with Diana dragging, and how funny that they hadn't noticed it before.

With these admissions the Middleton taxed Lottie. 'It isn't just me, you see!' he explained. 'It's the

whole of us. She *must* go, Lottie! Scene after scene's going flat because of one bad actress! You *can't* let a play be ruined just because some one's mistress has to be given a part!

'Lay off,' said Lottie sharply. 'She's no mistress! I thought that myself once, but it seems I was dumb!'

'Very well, she isn't,' said the Middleton hurriedly, 'but she's still a bad actress. The long and the short of it is that I can't give a performance with her in that part, that's all, Lottie! If you don't get rid of her, I shall have to go, that's all!'

'Ah, nuts!' said Lottie. 'Quit pulling that stuff on me, Doug!' But she moved a little uneasily. 'I'll have a talk with Christopher. I must say, she seemed O.K. to me!'

When the Middleton had gone back on to the stage she beckoned Robin over to her and moved to the back row of the pit.

'Hey there, Christopher!' she cried in ringing tones. 'Give 'em five minutes' break and come along here a minute, will ya? It's about your discovery,' she added to Robin in a milder voice. 'Doug's got so's he can't act with her.'

Robin felt a sudden chill run up his spine.

'I'm perfectly satisfied with her,' he said defensively. 'I think she's going to be very good indeed!'

'You wouldn't fool me, would ya?' Lottie inquired as an afterthought. 'About that kid, I mean? You ain't combining business and pleasure, Robin?'

'In what way?' said Robin, flushing.

At this moment Christopher arrived, and she let the matter drop and dragged him down into the seat beside her. 'It's about the Shand dame,' she said briskly. 'Doug's got ants in his pants about her being a bum trouper. Says she's letting the show down or sumthin'. Whatcha gotta say?'

'I've no fault to find with her,' said Christopher curtly. 'She's a damn sight more sympathetic in her part than he is in the lead. He's playing the musician as a Bloomsbury genius instead of a sensitive young man.'

'We're nart discussing Doug,' Lottie returned with a twitch of impatience. 'Just at the moment it's whether the Shand dame stays in or goes out!'

'What reason are you going to give for turning her out?' asked Christopher. 'There's nothing wrong with her work.'

'The cast don't think so, according to Doug.'

'I think I'll have a talk to the cast,' said Christopher grimly.

'Ah—ah!' said Lottie sternly. 'Don't you go startin' no rough-house, Chris! Lay off the cast! Maybe we better let it go fer the moment. G'wan back and work 'em!'

Christopher rose and smacked the script against the chair in front of him. 'I'd be glad if you talked to Middleton,' he said, 'as we're on the subject. I can't compete with that perpetual defiance much longer.'

'Finding the show too much for you, ha?' Lottie fired back disapprovingly.

'I can produce a play,' Christopher returned with an edge to his voice, 'and I can work with most actors; but I didn't allow for the time I've had to waste on mental battles with Middleton! He's undermined the discipline and fuddled the rest of them till they don't know their fronts from their backsides, and I'd give half my salary to go upon the stage and kick him silly, just for the good of the production!'

'Half your salary's a lot,' said Garstin's voice mildly, 'when you could do it for nothing.' He was leaning over the row behind with his hat tilted forward over one eye, and when Lottie veered round in surprise, he lifted it politely and handed her a sheaf of press-cuttings. 'Just came in to give you the advance notices, Mrs. Osgood,' he said in notes of honey. Christopher turned and went back to the orchestra pit without looking at him and called the cast back from the wings, where the Middleton was engaged in convulsing them with witty stories. They came slowly, as if the Middleton had got in something else before he started on his witty stories, and

he noticed that Diana had been sitting alone in the other corner of the stage.

It was from this moment on that the cast took up the Middleton's cause and began juggling the tempo of their lines when Diana was on the stage, and the next evening, when she and Robin were alone in the bed-sitting-room in Ebury Street, her resolve not to let any one know how unhappy she was broke down, and Robin was told the whole story of how she couldn't act with the Middleton, or any of the others, because of something that just seemed to dry her up and make her do everything wrong, and that she had been trying to find out what the matter was, and couldn't, and had come to the conclusion that it was simply that she was a bad actress and had better go out of the play in case it hurt it for her to be in it, and Robin had a desperate ten minutes persuading her that there wasn't a thing wrong with her acting, and that Christopher had said that she got much more sympathy for the Heroine's Sister than the Middleton did for the Hero, and begged her not to worry about it, as everything would be straightened out and smooth again by the end of the week, and swore that he would rather not have the play go on at all than go on without her.

Meanwhile, in her suite in the Ritz, Lottie was being stormed at by shot and shell, though in a restrained and persuasive manner, by the Middleton and Garstin. Lottie was beginning to feel the strain of the conflict, but the Middleton was surprised in spite of himself at the opposition she put up.

'Well, if you gotta know,' she announced finally, 'I put the kid in as a favour to Robin because he's the first guy that ever treated me like I was something dignified, and I like him a whole lot for it, and I wanna keep the kid in as a favour to Robin, and what I can't see is, if she gets you down, why in shucks you can't just go on actin' like she wasn't there! It ain't the first time an actor's had to make do with some one he don't feel too good about! If she's going to be bad, O.K.! Let her go ahead an' be bad! It's *her* lallapalooze, not yours!'

'Just a minute,' the Middleton returned placatingly. 'I think you've mistaken them a little, Lottie. You wouldn't listen to me when I said she was his mistress, but I think you might listen to Garstin——'

'Garstin can go peel himself a nut!' said Lottie flatly. 'Those two are straight, Doug! I know! I can tell! That's why I'm doing this show for 'em and for nuthin' else! So lay off, will ya? Lay off!' She shook her shoulders indignantly. 'An' gimme another drink!'

The Middleton took her glass and refilled it without further speech. He was seething with frustrated ire, and for two pins would have thrown the decanter across the room to relieve his feelings; but his face was still mild and passive when he handed the glass back to her and reseated himself. Garstin, from where he lay at ease in the plush arm-chair, stirred gently and flicked his cigarette, and then said, 'You're absolutely in the right, Mrs. Osgood; though I hate to take sides. It's not that I don't sympathize with Doug, but I know Robin from a less aggressive angle. He's fantastically innocent and gullible, up to a point, but he's got an unbendable will of his own. That's what Doug barked his shin against. You're a very canny judge of character, Mrs. Osgood.'

'Never wrong, Lottie assured him with pardonable satisfaction. 'You don't do too bad yourself, Garstin!'

'Oh, I don't know,' Garstin returned depreciatingly. 'I trip up a lot. I once got chucked down three flights of stairs on account of poor judgment.'

'Ya did?' said Lottie, sitting up. 'Tell me about it! Who done it?'

'Christopher Lovell,' said Garstin without malice. 'And he was well in his rights. I bear him no ill. I'd all unwittingly laid hands upon his Woman. You see, nobody told me she was his Woman,' he added pathetically, 'and she'd rather led me to think she was mine.'

'And he threw you down three floors?' said Lottie sympathetically. 'The big thug! When was this?'

'While you were all in Paris.'

'And who was the dame?'

'Ah,' said Garstin gallantly, 'that I'd rather keep sequestered! Not cricket, you know.'

'I'll tell you who it was,' said the Middleton willingly. 'It was Diana Shand.'

'What?' said Lottie incredulously.

Garstin shot the Middleton a look of deep rebuke.

'Dammit, Doug, I said I wanted to keep out of this!' he objected. He turned to Lottie beseechingly. 'Don't let it go any farther, Mrs. Osgood. I didn't mean to let it out at all. You see, Robin doesn't know about Christopher's—I mean, he *trusts* Diana, and it'd be pretty rotten to disillusion him. He's an idealistic sort of chap, old Robin.'

'So she's a two-timer, ha?' said Lottie crisply. 'Why, the low-down——'

'No, please!' Garstin interrupted with saintly reproach. 'I depend on you not to take advantage of anything I may have inadvertently let slip. After all, she's got her way to make in the theatre. You can't blame her, Mrs. Osgood.'

'I c'n blame her making a stooge outa Robin!' said Lottie fiercely.

Garstin rose and put down his glass.

'I feel a swine,' he said simply. 'I'd have sooner bitten off my tongue. You see, I still love her.' He paused for the full drama of this to penetrate Lottie's protective covering, and then gave a hopeless shrug. 'Do you mind if I go? It's rather spoilt my evening.' He flicked his fingers behind his back to the Middleton, who grasped his meaning and at once added that he had to be going as well, and would come part of the way with Garstin.

Outside in the street he released a burst of laughter and leant against one of the pillars that decorate the portals of the Ritz, and Garstin allowed himself a slight smile of justifiable pride.

'Gorstrufe!' said the Middleton at last. 'You're the world's lousiest actor, but it worked! How in hell did you get away with it?'

'The curious thing, which you will never see,' said

Garstin, 'is that I'm a hit with women. Can't think what it is; but I can do anything with them, so why not let's face it?'

As a result, at half-past eleven the next morning, the enemy opened fire.

In the middle of one of his scenes with Diana, when the Middleton was seated at a table, and just as Diana had reached the beginning of one of her speeches, he suddenly and unexpectedly crashed his fists down on to the table and shouted wildly: 'This can't go on! I can't go on like this, I tell you! It's hopeless! Absolutely hopeless!' and sat breathing defiantly down into the stalls, conscious of the shock he had given every one, but grimly determined to see the thing through now he had started it.

Christopher, who had been sitting on the back of a pit chair, climbed off it unhurriedly and walked slowly down the aisle to the orchestra railing and rested his hands on it, watched in breathless silence by the cast, the Electrician, and the theatre cat.

'Something troubling you?' he asked in a quiet and even voice.

The Middleton glared back at him with open hostility, and plunged into a slightly incoherent but forceful assurance that a great deal was troubling him, mainly the fact that as he couldn't play his scenes the play was frozen mutton, and he had a reputation to look after, and unless something was done about it he would have to hand in his resignation.

'Better talk to Mrs. Osgood, then,' said Christopher, unexcited. 'It's her play.'

'Leave me outa this!' Lottie's voice carried from the back of the stalls. 'You're the producer!'

The Middleton turned back to Christopher.

'You can't tell me this scene isn't the most bloody awful thing that ever happened!' he challenged. 'Because I know it *is*! I can feel it is!'

'You're perfectly right,' Christopher assured him. 'It *is* the most bloody awful thing that ever happened.'

'Well, then!' said the Middleton triumphantly. 'What are you going to do about it?'

'Nothing. It's your fault,' Christopher returned, still unruffled. 'You're playing a shy young man as an established prig, and it's a very fine prig, but it's knocked the guts clean through the bottom of the play.'

'I'm doing what you told me to do!' the Middleton flung back unpleasantly.

'You've queried every damn thing I've told you since we went into rehearsal!' Christopher contradicted in a quicker voice.

'I resent that! I've a right to discuss my part with you!' the Middleton asserted angrily.

'You've no right to waste the time of the producer and the rest of the cast over things that can be settled outside rehearsal!'

'I don't agree that they can be settled anywhere except on the stage!'

'As long as I'm the producer here I'll decide where differences can be settled and when people are wasting valuable time!' Christopher returned, growing red. 'And if there's any one in the cast who isn't prepared to take orders from this producer, they'll all be well advised to get the hell out of here and let me get in actors that are!'

'I take it that was meant for me in particular?' said the Middleton aggressively.

'You can take it how you like!' Christopher assured him warmly.

'Then I hand in my resignation!' said the Middleton magnificently.

'Right. Accepted,' said Christopher immediately.

There was a dead silence for a second, and the Middleton gazed at him incredulously.

'I warn you. I meant what I said,' he said, struggling to keep it from pathos.

'So did I,' said Christopher indifferently. 'If you'll leave your part with the Stage Manager, we needn't trouble you any more.'

The Middleton gazed out into the stalls desperately, but Lottie, for reasons of her own, was content to let things run on a little longer before giving judgment.

The Middleton became suddenly conscious that he was still standing in the middle of the stage and was looking more than slightly foolish. With a quick jerk he flung his script on to the table and strode off into the wings, picked up his hat and coat, and disappeared through the 'Exit to Stage Door.'

Not one of the cast gathered in the wings spoke to him as he passed, and most of them avoided his eye. In the minute that followed Christopher all but won their allegiance. They looked on him with a new light of respect in their eyes, and felt suddenly ashamed of themselves for having abetted the Middleton, and then, just as the new era was about to dawn, Lottie's voice came ringing down the auditorium.

'Stage Manager!' it thundered. 'Go after Mr. Middleton and bring him back!' And everything was back where it was.

Christopher flung his half-lighted cigarette into the orchestra pit, and went back up the aisle to her.

'I gather by that I'm sacked?' he said, before she could speak.

Lottie, who had been about to sack him, stiffened.

'Quit mind-reading!' she said sharply. 'It don't! And I don't take no resignation either! You'll produce this play as per contract, and you'll produce it with Doug Middleton in the lead!' She rose, made a lightning change of tactics, and marched down to the front of the theatre. 'Hey!' she ordered. 'Everybody on stage! And make it snappy, will ya?'

The cast ventured out from the wings uncertainly.

'Mr. Middleton's coming back,' she said in resounding tones, 'and Mr. Lovell will continue to produce. If there's one more scene like the last, I'll sack the whole lot of you and start again; get it?' At this moment the Middleton reappeared through the swing doors and she turned on him. 'And I don't want any of the coming back as a favour from you!' she said. 'So nuts

on the ruffled dignity stuff. You got what you asked for, and if you've any horse-sense you won't start anything fresh! Remember this, all of you! As long as Mr. Lovell's producer, he represents me, and when you defy him you defy me! And don't get me wrong! No one ever defied me yet and got away whole! Miss Shand, I wanna see ya down back of the stalls a minute. O.K. Mr. Lovell, go ahead with the next scene!' And she turned round and swept back up the aisle with such aplomb that the cast very nearly broke into spontaneous applause though they hated the sight of Lottie Osgood and all she portended.

Diana came down through the pass-door from the stage, and was on her way to the back of the theatre when Robin joined her in the dark and took her hand.

'I'm coming with you,' he said in an undertone, and felt her fingers relax in his gratefully; but when they presented themselves before Lottie she banished him without ado with: 'Scram, son. This is private,' said so mildly that he was reassured and went. 'Siddown,' Lottie added to Diana, 'I guess you know what all the song and dance was about jus' now?'

'I think I do,' Diana admitted sadly.

'Seems the Middleton can't get along with the inturpretation you give your part.' She transferred her attention to the stage for a moment and then resumed in an unemotional voice, 'I thought maybe you'd like to quit and save it happenin' again.'

'If you think it's best,' said Diana, with commendable steadiness in her voice. 'I don't want to be in it, apart from it being Robin's play, if it makes so much trouble,' which Lottie mistook for slyness and brushed aside.

'Then I'd hand in your notice to Mr. Lovell,' she suggested, unmoved. 'I'm sorry ya have to do it, kid, but it looks kinda like it's unavoidable. I'll see you get two weeks' salary compensation.'

'I'd rather not take it,' said Diana awkwardly, 'if you wouldn't mind. I don't feel I really worked for it or anything.' She hesitated, and then added, 'I suppose I could go home straightaway really, couldn't I? Without

seeing any one, I mean. I could write to Mr. Lovell about the resignation.'

'Sure,' said Lottie. 'I know how you feel. Tough in a way. But it ain't the end of the world. You'll feel better about it after a day or two. 'Bye, kid.'

'Good-bye,' said Diana, and disappeared into the gloom.

CHAPTER XV

Caucus Race, First Heat

ROBIN hovered patiently near the pass-door to the stage for a minute or two, and then the fear that Lottie's business with Diana was not all it should be grew to a certainty, and he made his way back to the pit in direct defiance of Lottie's wish, and arrived there about a minute after Diana had slipped out of the front of the theatre via the Exit to Buffet Bar and had begun walking back to Ebury Street (having left her hat and the small embroidered wool-bag with her bus fares in it at the back of the stage) with her head held high and the dull, numb pain of failure beginning to ache in her breast and drum in her ears: for which there is no remedy and from which there is no escape.

When he found Lottie alone he backed away, straining his eyes in the dark to see where Diana had gone, but was halted by a voice that brooked no flouting and told to seat himself beside her.

'Lay off Miss Shand for a minute or two,' Lottie counselled, as he sat unwillingly. 'I gart something to tell ya. She and me's just had a perfectly frenly li'l talk, Robin, and when we got through she had it all worked out that the show'd run slicker without her, so she checked out.'

This took Robin a second or two to grasp.

'Where is she now?' he said quickly.

Lottie caught his arm as he rose. 'She went out.

I guess it's one of those times when a dame don't want company, son.'

'Which way did she go?' Robin interrupted, so sharply that it cut Lottie short with the potency of a smack in the eye. 'It wasn't back to the stage—it must have been out of the front——' He broke off and rushed away out into the foyer, which was empty, and projected himself through the swing doors leading to the street with such force that they flip-flapped protestingly after him, and began running down Shaftesbury Avenue towards Piccadilly Circus, searching vainly amongst the crowds for Diana. At last he saw her ahead of him and put on an extra spurt, dodged between a policeman and a lamp-post, all but spilt a Boy Scout selling little flags, and caught up with her outside the Royal Academy. He put his arm round her without a word, and with lightning speed halted a passing taxi imperiously, swung open the door, ordered it to Ebury Street, and hurried her in and slammed the door after him, and was only just in time as it was. Almost before the driver had pulled down his little flag and ground his gears Diana's tears took matters into their own hands and fell, and Robin held her close against him and let her cry, and patted her gently and made small soothing noises.

'It's all over and finished,' he insisted, trying his best to sound victorious. 'I'm never going back either. And even if it *was* a bad play, it was never as bad as Middleton's made it with his acting, and we're well out of it, Diana, so don't worry about it another moment. It's not worth it. It's all finished and done with, and I'm not sorry—I'm not in the least sorry, and you mustn't be either, because it wasn't an admission of defeat leaving it, not when it was such a mess, and something'll happen which'll make you terribly glad you did—I know it will! And I'd like to see them all blown up by a bomb for treating you like they have—the old swine!'

Here Diana shook her head resolutely and gave him to understand in a muffled whisper that it wasn't their fault but hers, for not being a good actress, and he held

her more firmly to him and hinted darkly at a day soon to come when her success as an actress would make them feel about as important as freckles on a hippopotamus, and that when that day did come he would trail his coat on the ground and dare them to step on it, though he wasn't sure whether this was the right metaphor to use or quite what it meant. Still, it succeeded in cheering Diana a little, which was all he demanded of it, and when they were safely back in the room in Ebury Street and Diana had dried her eyes and blown her nose and been helped by him to brush her hair and powder the tear-stains on her cheeks, she was able to convince him (by saying it over and over again) that she really felt perfectly all right, and would he please go back to the theatre and behave as if nothing had happened? When he refused vehemently, Diana became deeply distressed, and begged him to go back, if only for her sake, which of course put a different complexion on the thing at once, and Robin went.

Things were much as he had left them, except that a new actress was on the stage reading Diana's part already, and the Middleton was looking as complacent as a fat alderman and was treating Christopher with all but open condescension, and Garstin was sitting next to Lottie at the back of the stalls and egging her on, which God knows she never needed.

A fierce but ineffectual resentment kept Robin from going anywhere near them, and as Christopher was a good distance away, near the orchestra pit, he slipped across the theatre and sat down. At first Christopher appeared not to have noticed his return, but a few minutes later he walked slowly backwards down the centre aisle with his eye alertly on the stage, and when he drew level with Robin dropped his hand sympathetically on his shoulder for a moment.

'Rotten luck,' he said in a quiet voice. 'It's me next, by the way. I can hear Garstin laying the fuse up at the back there,' and then moved back to the orchestra rail again.

But the Middleton and Garstin, like true artists,

hurried nothing. A week went by in halcyon calm, the new actress learnt her part and proved satisfactory, and a complete apathy descended on Robin.

He no longer winced when he heard his lines butchered, he no longer cared whether the play flopped or not. Diana was going away at the end of the term and all their fine hopes were shattered. Everything had gone wrong, and everything he had done he had bungled. He had made a fool of himself over and over again, and all this was happening as a punishment.

Quietly and with horrid stealth the first dress rehearsal drew near, five days to the first night.

An uncle of Meadowsweet's had supplied the scenery and Angusson's brother-in-law the wardrobe. The scenery cost Meadowsweet's uncle three hundred pounds and the wardrobe cost Angusson's brother-in-law forty-three pounds nine lem'three. The scenery cost Lottie one thousand two hundred and twenty-seven pounds five and the wardrobe seven hundred and forty-three pounds nine lem'three, so Angusson sent Lucy Erding to the Lido for a fortnight and bought a new set of golf clubs.

The dress rehearsal was called for six-thirty, and promptly at nine forty-five the curtain rose on the first scene.

The actors not involved herded together in the dress circle and watched with sickly fascination and felt convinced that it was all hopeless and that nothing could save it, and sank deeper and deeper into coma; and Lottie sat at the back of the stalls with a strange thin gentleman in a mackintosh. Robin kept near Christopher, who divided his time between the dress circle and the stalls. Angusson and Meadowsweet arrived late and sat in the back row of the pit without taking off their hats, looking glum and intense, and a small photographer roamed the theatre disconsolately looking for somewhere to set up his camera.

The curtain rose on the First Act to silence, save for a bitter altercation in the orchestra pit as to which musician had played off the wrong score during the overture, and

a monotonous hammering from back stage. The First Act came to its close, the Stage Manager screamed hoarsely and the curtain fell casually, trapping the Heroine's Mother out in front of the foot-lights. She gazed foolishly out into the auditorium, laughed pathetically to cover her shame, and then spent four minutes trying to find the opening back to the stage.

Christopher bit the stem of his pipe and shifted his position slightly.

'Notice how Middleton did everything his own sweet way?' he asked grimly. 'That's your play gone up in smoke.' He brought his feet down angrily. 'By God, I'll keep the lot of them going through it to-morrow until he plays the thing properly!' He raised his voice to the Electrician, who had put his head through the curtain. 'Tell 'em to carry straight on!' he ordered.

The Electrician nodded and vanished, and a moment later the theatre was plunged into pitch darkness.

'What the hell's gone wrong?' shouted Christopher with ebbing control.

'Blown a fuse,' a voice volunteered from the direction of the stage.

'How long's it going to take?'

There was a thoughtful silence, and then the voice said it didn't know, but would ask.

Behind stage confusion was rife. The Middleton, finding himself suddenly enveloped in darkness, gave way to temperament and announced that it was too much and that he couldn't go on, and then stumbled against a flat which collapsed with a rending sound and struck a passing scene-shifter, crushing two ham sandwiches and a beef patty.

Through all this Lottie sat silent and still in the stalls. If he had had the time to devote to it, this would have struck Christopher as peculiar and ominous; but his time was not his own, and the strange man in the mackintosh had awoken no curiosity in him until too late.

The lights suddenly came up again, and somebody cheered ironically. The lights at once flickered twice and went off again. A burst of frenzied hysteria from the

Middleton rang through the theatre, and for no reason at all the small photographer let off his flash-light, which threw him on his back and gave Meadowsweet an attack of heartburn. The lights came on again in time to quell a panic, however, and this time stayed on.

The Middleton at once appeared through the curtains trembling and breathless.

'It's no good!' he shouted wildly. 'I can't stand it! I can't go on! It's a farce! It's insane! I can't play for you! You'll have to get some one else! I'm finished!' And disappeared again and rushed to his dressing-room, where his dresser fed him *sal-volatile* and rum.

Lottie had a hasty conference with the man in the mackintosh and then rose. 'Mr. Lovell!' she blared. 'Come down to the stalls, will ya?—and Mr. Gardner!' and beckoned imperiously to Angusson and Meadowsweet.

'Exit Lovell,' said Christopher prophetically as they rose and made their way to the stairs, 'leaving Middleton Queen of the Fiesta. I'm glad I'm too damn tired to feel the pangs of defeat. All I want is a long, dreamless sleep. Poor old Robin! I wish I could have helped you a bit more than I have.'

'You've been grand about it,' Robin returned. 'I only wish—— It's all finished now, anyway. I'm glad; honestly, Christopher.'

When they presented themselves to Lottie she was standing with Meadowsweet and Angusson on either side and was looking flushed. So were Meadowsweet and Angusson. There had obviously been words.

'Meet Mr. Pullet!' she said without preamble, indicating the mackintosh with her thumb. 'Mr. Lovell, Mr. Gardner—author. Mr. Pullet's been watching the show.' The mackintosh nodded dourly and sucked a matchstick. 'I've just had a talk with my managers, Mr. Lovell. They reckon the show ain't what it should be.'

'A first dress rehearsal isn't the ideal time to see any show for the first time,' Christopher returned.

'Know all that,' said Mr. Pullet flatly. 'But no shape. Needs pulling together.'

'And Mr. Pullet's going to pull it!' Lottie added resolutely, and then had the grace to look away for a moment, vaguely conscious that Mr. Pullet was now her enemy under the skin for life. 'I'm handing over the production to him right away. You'll be paid your fee of course, Mr. Lovell, in full.' This was obviously what the words with Meadson Ltd. had been about. 'O.K., Mr. Pullet! Go ahead!'

'Just a minute,' said Robin, amazed at the authority behind his own voice, but clinging to it. 'I don't want Mr. Lovell sacked. I refuse to have him sacked.'

There was a pause.

'Say that again,' said Lottie dangerously. 'You *what*?'

'I refuse to have him sacked.'

'You giving me orders?' she demanded incredulously.

'I've a right to object to having my play damaged,' said Robin doggedly. 'You promised me at the beginning that I could have it produced the way I wanted it, and you've never kept your promise once since we started. You've put in people I don't like, and you've had your way about everything, but I won't let you sack the only person who's tried to make a success of it just because the lights go wrong and Mr. Middleton has hysterics!'

Lottie whirled on Angusson. 'Has he a right to object?' she fired.

'No,' said Angusson. 'Clause twenty-three of his contract. The final decision on any matter rests with my partner and me.'

'With who?' asked Lottie, swelling visibly.

'My partner and I,' Angusson repeated, but with less relish.

'Is that clause in any other contracts?' Lottie inquired with a red light coming into her eye.

Meadowsweet felt his heartburn coming back again and sat down in a nearby chair.

'One or two others,' Angusson said evasively.

'Mine, for one?'

There was another pause.

'Well, in a way, yes,' said Angusson weakly.

'Let me see that contract!' Lottie ordered menacingly.

'I can't,' said Angusson, weaker still.

'Why not?'

'It's in my office.'

'Then go and get it! And bring Mr. Gardner's along, too!'

'He needn't bother about mine,' Robin put in.

'Why not?' said Lottie swiftly. 'You workin' in with these guys?'

'No,' said Robin; 'but I never signed anything.'

Here came another pause, making three.

'You which? You what?' said Meadowsweet, struggling for breath. 'It's a lie! Joe, I'm sick! I'm dying! He ain't never signed nothing!'

Angusson opened and shut his mouth soundlessly twice, and then said in an unsteady voice, 'What d'you mean, you never signed anything? You *must* have signed something! Meadowsweet signed you up!'

'Nobody did,' said Robin with convincing honesty.

'Are you sure?' Christopher put in with a gleam in his eye.

'Certain,' said Robin.

'But why didn't you *say* something!' Angusson burst out. 'Why didn't you *told* us?'

'Because I didn't think you'd forgotten,' said Robin simply.

Angusson leaned back against Meadowsweet for support and his brow was damp.

'Look, Mr. Gardner,' he said with a quaver of supplication. 'there's been a mistake in the books. Maybe you'd better come round to the office now and fix it up. Before we discuss anything else. It was only a *small* slip——'

'It was a mighty big slip,' Christopher corrected him, in a gentle purr.

'In what way?' inquired Lottie, athirst for knowledge.

'It means,' said Christopher, 'that Mr. Gardner can stop this production.'

'No, it don't!' said Angusson loudly.

'Yes, it do!' Christopher returned pleasantly. 'He's got the lot of you where he wants you. And he's got you on his own terms.'

§

It took an hour and four minutes and a solicitor called Mosenthal to convince Lottie that Christopher had told no more than the simple truth, and seated in the Manager's office while the cast hovered listlessly about the stage waiting to go through the third act, she found herself beaten for the first time in her life; and it came hard to Lottie to admit it even to herself, let alone a roomful of thieves. Within the next few minutes she had to decide either to let her production die that night or see it presented in five days' time on Robin's terms, which were the retaining of Christopher and the sacking of the Middleton and Garstin Bannock. Bruised and thwarted, she sat and glowered across the desk at Angusson, whom she loathed most—having learned from Mosenthal the extent of his haul on *Soft Laughter*—and wondered which of her decisions would give the maximum discomfort to the most people. On reflection it seemed too obvious an admission of defeat to cancel production, and she turned to the alternative. Replacing the Middleton at five days' notice was going to be no small feat, and she was interested to know how Christopher intended to go about it. Then inspiration visited her, and she saw her way clear.

'Mr. Lovell,' she said without rancour, 'I stand to lose a packet if I take this show off now, but the packet's gonna be a darn sight bigger if I wait till the noospaper reviews come out. I'd like to get a lil of my money back if I can. I guess you don't grudge me that? Can

you give an assurance that once Doug's out in the snow you can get this show straightened out in time to open Tuesday night ?'

'I can get it straightened out in time,' said Christopher, 'but it'd be wiser to cancel production.'

This gave final solidity to Lottie's resolve.

'I've spent too much,' she returned, 'thanks' to Vinegar-Puss over there and his phoney contract! I wanna see something for my money. I'm gonna open Tuesday. With Robin in Doug's part.'

Angusson broke a stunned silence.

'You're mad,' he said involuntarily.

'Well, at least, I ain't warped like a corkscrew!' Lottie returned crisply. 'Lay low, ya squid!'

She turned back to Christopher, noting with pleasure that he looked deeply thoughtful. 'You're in the middle of a theatre-boom,' she proceeded. 'There ain't a Star free at the moment. If you can't cast a Star in the lead, ya gotta get some one with noos value. Playwright in own play—get it? I'm willing to take the chance, if he is.'

'He hasn't got a chance to take,' said Christopher flatly.

'How dja feel about it, Robin?' asked Lottie direct. 'Ya know the words. Ya know what Chris wants. Have you got the guts?'

Robin sat silent. Ten months' training at the Studio and one public appearance as Ophelia. Lottie had gone mad, like Angusson said, that's what it was. He imagined himself making his entrance on the first night and went suddenly giddy.

'It isn't *me* that's got anything to lose,' he said at last. And at this moment there was a sharp knock on the door and in came the Middleton.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' he said tersely; 'but we've been waiting just over an hour and ten minutes! Is the last act going to be done to-night? Because if not, you might dismiss the cast!'

'Ah there, Doug,' said Lottie smoothly. 'I was just going to have 'em call you along. Siddown, will ya?'

The Middleton shot a quick glance round the assembly, sensed climax, and sat.

'I thought you'd resigned,' said Angusson unsociably.

'Oh, that outburst?' the Middleton returned easily. 'Just nerves, you know. Naturally I was very sorry after I'd done it.'

'The thing is,' said Lottie, 'I been asked to make one or two changes. They reckon we can get along without your pal Pullet for one.'

'My pal?' echoed the Middleton, pained. 'I hardly know the man!'

'That'd make it easier to get along without him,' said Lottie pleasantly. 'There's more. Garstin Bannock ain't wanted around either.'

'I see,' said the Middleton evenly. 'And what else?'

'I'm still waiting to hear from Mr. Gardner,' said Lottie, leaning back.

The Middleton looked across at Robin and then back at Lottie.

'Would I be presuming if I asked exactly what's happened?' he inquired civilly.

'Not at all,' said Lottie. 'Mr. Gardner never signed a contract, that's all.'

'You God-forsaken fools!' said the Middleton without a pause, eyeing Meadowsweet and Angusson vitriolically.

'We've gone into arl that,' Lottie assured him with a touch of asperity. 'It seems a lot of the guys round here have been playing me for a sap. That ain't the point; the point is, if the show opens Tuesday you'll be watching it from out front.'

The Middleton's eyes narrowed.

'Then of course you're not opening,' he suggested in a hard voice.

'That's something we ain't gone over yet,' Lottie returned, strictly neutral. It had just struck her that Angusson and Meadowsweet had come to her on the Middleton's recommendation, and it gave things a

slightly darker hue. She now disliked every one in the room impartially. 'Seeing I've been soaked for thirty thousand dollars I can't get back, I'm kinda keen to see how the public takes the show!'

'And you think you'll get some one to take over my part at five days' notice?' the Middleton inquired with a faint sneer.

'I dare say we c'n fix it,' said Lottie unruffled.

'Oh yes?' said the Middleton. 'But supposing I object to being sacked without notice? There's such things as damages.'

'Yeah, and there's a theatre full o' people who heard you chuck ya hand in a coupla hours back,' Lottie countered. 'It's just a question of accepting ya' resignation.'

'But you can't take advantage——!' the Middleton burst out angrily, with a reddening face. 'I *said* I didn't mean it! I mean, it's absurd! Every one knew I wasn't serious!' He half rose. 'You *can't* turn me out of that part! If this show goes on with any one else in it, I'll be a laughing-stock!—I'll be ruined! Christ, you can't *do* it, Lottie!'

He whirled on Robin. 'You bloody little scrounger! *You* put her up to this, didn't you? You and Lovell between you——'

'Hey!' Lottie cut him short fiercely. 'Whaddya mean, he put me up to it?' She rose to her feet pugnaciously, and the Middleton whirled on her.

'If you put this play on with a new lead at five days' notice you're a bigger fool than any one's taken you for yet!' he said, shaking with fury. 'I warn you Lottie! You'll take the fall of your life, and by God, you'll deserve it! By God you will!'

'That'll be enough from you!' Lottie rocketed, banging the desk. 'Beat it before I sock you with the ink-pot, you double-crossing, sex-soused son of an Argentine banjo-player! Scram outa here!'

'Right!' the Middleton shouted back. 'I'm going! And if you *do* put the show on, think twice before you come back to *me* on your bloody knees at the last minute!'

I wish you luck, you pot-bellied wreck !' And the door slammed after him.

Meadowsweet came out from behind the sofa and picked his hat up with trembling fingers. Lottie stood with heaving bosom for a moment, glowering at the door, and then gradually simmered down and reseated herself.

'Chris,' she requested in a calmer voice. 'Go mix me a high-ball.'

Christopher rose obligingly, opened the manager's safe, and took out a syphon and a bottle of whisky (watched with aching longing by Meadowsweet) and gave Lottie a high-ball that was seven-eighths neat.

She took it gratefully, and there was a respectful hush while it vanished.

Then she leant back.

'Well,' she said. 'Do we go on or go nuts ?'

Christopher tapped his pipe on his heel and then said : 'You're still set on the idea of Robin playing ?'

'Yeah !' said Lottie flatly.

'Then it's up to Robin. The chances are about ninety-nine against him.'

Over-anxiety prompted Angussan to unwise comment.

'Maybe you haven't got anything to lose,' he urged desperately. 'But my firm has. You can't do it, Gardner ! We can't face another flop ! It'll put us out of business !'

Christopher took his pipe out of his mouth.

'Go ahead and do it, Robin !' he said with sudden vehemence. 'I'll get behind and push all I know how !'

'Attaboy !' said Lottie energetically. 'O.K. by you, Robin ?'

Robin looked helplessly from her to Christopher, and found himself bereft of resistance.

'Yes,' he said helplessly.

CHAPTER XVI

Caucus Race, Grand Finale

AT five-thirty on Tuesday, Ada FitzGerald arrived in London for the First Night, left her baggage at the Tavistock Hotel, took a taxi to the rooms in Ebury Street, and found Diana in.

'I'm going to be told everything,' she said firmly, without giving Diana time to speak, but kissing her warmly. 'First of all I hear you're playing, then I see by the papers you aren't, and then Robin suddenly blossoms out into a Noel Coward without warning or notice, and for all any one cared I could be writhing with chronic curiosity on the floor of my cottage for want of enlightenment. Start from the beginning, go right through the whole gamut, leaving nothing out, no matter how intimate, and don't stop until you get to where I came in at the door just now.' And by judicious encouragement and artful cross-questions she drew the whole story from Diana, and then sat back and said, '*Whew!* My God, child, why didn't you tell me before? You poor darlings! Got a 'phone in the house? Don't ask why! I want to use it *now!*' And over the 'phone, watched by a troubled Diana from outside the box, she demanded audience with a doughty knight of Fleet Street, who owned eight newspapers and a Health magazine which he published anonymously. She got it, moreover, within the minute.

'Hullo, you old trollop!' said the knight brusquely. 'I'd hoped you were safely interned in Sussex!'

'Come off your high horse,' Ada ordered rapidly. 'I need your help, Sam, and I need it quick. If you never move a finger in friendship again, move it now!' And she gave him a brief outline of the crime afoot.

'I haven't seen the kid,' she finished up, 'but they've been working him twelve hours a day for the last

five days, and he must be nearly dead of nerves. The whole thing's an outrage, Sam! She's put him in deliberately to smash his own show, and the poor little devil doesn't stand a chance in a million!'

'What do you want me to do about it?' inquired the knight long-sufferingly. 'Print the story and land myself neck-deep in libel actions?'

'No,' said Ada, 'fix the critics.'

'Ah, hell, now, Ada!' he objected, roused. 'Be reasonable——'

'Sam,' said Ada sternly, 'there isn't a critic on any one of your eight papers that knows a play from a donkey's—from a bar of soap; and you know it, you old sinner! It won't do 'em any harm to get behind and push for once, instead of writing half a column of facetious epigrams and dud puns! Come on, Sam. You've made a bad play run before now, with a stroke of your pen. If you do it to this one, God'll forgive you others, and you go to Heaven when you die. *Please*, Sam, old darling! I promise never to ask another favour of you as long as I live!'

There was a pause.

'All right,' said the knight gloomily. 'Damn you, Ada. Better lunch with me and the missus to-morrow. And now to hell with you! I'm a busy man!'

Ada came out of the telephone box with a smile of such serenity that Diana was partially cheered in spite of herself.

'Spoke number one in Osgood's wheel,' said Ada contentedly. 'What's the time? My hat! Twenty-past seven! There's no time to change! We'd better grab something to eat and go straight to the theatre! Can you give me a wash and brush-up?'

As they were going up the stairs the front door-bell pealed wildly, and just as they were passing the black marble negro with the salver they heard Miss Abernethy answer it and an urgent and breathless voice demand Miss Diana Shand. Diana and Ada FitzGerald paused and looked over the banisters.

Miss Agatha Penn was being ushered in by Miss

Abernethy, who was pledging herself to go and see if Miss Shand was in.

'I'm in,' Diana called down, mystified and a little uneasy.

'Say,' said Miss Penn quickly, 'can I see you a minute?' and began running up the stairs. Diana led the way into Number Eleven and introduced Ada FitzGerald and shut the door, and as soon as the door was shut Agatha Penn burst out: 'Look, never mind why I'm telling you, but you gotta stop your boy friend opening to-night. . . . Doug's planted the gallery full of thugs, an' there'll be a riot if the curtain goes up. . . . I only just got wise to it—and I'm keepin' out avit—but I ain't going to see Doug put over a lousy trick like that and get away with it. . . . Jeez, I'm outa breath from running!' and she flung herself on to the divan.

'Is this your idea of a joke?' asked Ada swiftly.

'You'll find out quick enough,' Agatha Penn assured her, struggling for breath.

'Hell!' said Ada FitzGerald.

Without a word, Diana snatched up her bag on her way to the door, ran down the stairs, slowed up as she reached the telephone box, and then ran on again when she saw some one was in it, flung open the front door, and raced along Ebury Street until she saw a taxi.

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'Quorrava nour, please!' mourned the call-boy. 'Quorrava nour!' and his feet made a noise like a pall-bearer on the cement passage as he passed the door.

'Oh, God,' said Robin, and gazed unsteadily into the dressing-room mirror and saw painted wonders.

'Plenty of time yet,' said Christopher consolingly, resting his cigarette on the edge of the table and picking up an eyebrow pencil. 'Hold still a minute while I adorn the left eyebrow. And stop shivering, or I'll draw a graph! You're going to be all right, you old beef-head.'

'No, I'm not!' said Robin.

'But dammit, you are! We took a chance, and it's come off, that's all! I can promise you no one's more surprised than I am. What the hell are you nervous about?'

'I'm not nervous,' said Robin inaudibly.

• 'That's fine, then!'

'I'm sick.'

'Rot!' said Christopher firmly; 'it's ordinary stage-fright. It'll go as soon as you get on to the stage. By the way, where's my brandy? I left it here a moment ago.'

'I drank it,' said Robin simply.

• 'Making three. You've got a nerve telling me you feel sick! Tight, more like it!'

'No,' said Robin, 'I'm not tight.' His voice broke. 'I wish I were.'

'It's better than wishing you were dead,' said Christopher cheerfully.

'I wish that too.'

'Crumbs! Snap out of it, Robin! It's your hour of triumph! Old Lottie must be beating herself over the head with punka-rollers for thinking you couldn't do it!'

'She's right, though. I'm going to be ghastly. I'll never be able to live it down. It'll haunt me for the rest of my life. Will they boo, Christopher?'

'Boo what?'

'Me,' said Robin pathetically.

'It takes a hell of a lot to make a gallery boo. This sort of play's right down their street. They'll eat it. You'll probably have all the gallery girls round at the Stage Door after the show with drawn autograph-albums. Then you'll know that you've arrived. It's the supreme test of popularity. Ever signed an autograph-album? Very satisfying. I always chuck in a couple of lines from Swinburne for good measure. It looks well; and they like it.'

'What's the time?' asked Robin nervously.

'Ten to eight. Eight to eight to be exact. Where was I? Oh, yes, Swinburne——'

'Eight more minutes,' said Robin with a fascinated eye on Christopher's wrist-watch.

'Yes. Like to go on stage and watch the audience coming in?'

Robin shuddered and said he wouldn't.

'It's very interesting. Three separate coteries. The Stalls are either overfed Capitalists fuddled with light wine, or critics. The Dress Circle's genteel and hasn't been able to make up its mind whether it ought to dress or not, but is partial to chocolates if wrapped in something noisy. The Gallery houses the true lovers of drama. Always bow to them first when taking a call. From them comes the only applause that's made their palms sting. Which reminds me of a very funny thing that once happened to an aunt of mine at a pantomime——'

'Christopher, I still feel sick.'

'Well, *be* sick then, and get it over.'

'It's not that sort of sick.'

'There's no other. It's been proved by statisticians. Listen, chump; when you go on I'm going to stand in the wings. If you feel unhappy about anything, just look over to my corner and I'll waggle my ears at you until you feel better again. If you want any advice, just cross over to me casually and talk out of the side of your mouth at me—like 'at, sec? S'easy when 'oo know 'ow, and yer lipsh don' move.' He readjusted his jaw. 'Get the hang of it?'

Robin smiled in spite of himself. 'Yes. Thank you, Christopher.'

'Feel better now?'

'Yes, thank you.'

And then there was a patter of running feet in the passage, and the door was flung open and Diana was in the room and had caught Robin by the arms.

'You're not to go on to-night—you're not to go on to-night!' she cried urgently. 'The gallery—Douglas Middleton's paid people to shout at you! Don't let them put the curtain up! Stop them, Christopher! Stop them!'

Christopher turned and doubled out of the room,

covered the stairs to the stage three at a time, and charged across the set to the spy-hole in the curtain.

The theatre was congested with people still coming in, and the dull impersonal hum of conversation (now raised so as to drown the orchestra) was surging up to the stage in waves. The stalls and the dress circle were looking reassuringly vacuous and conventional, but the first two rows of the gallery sat immobile.

They were large unwashed gentlemen in caps and jerseys, and they had things wrapped in newspapers on their knees.

Christopher cast a frenzied eye over the rest of the house, and then saw another row of them in the pit.

And in the middle of the stalls were the Middleton, Garstin Bannock, and Everard Carter, looking expectant.

The Stage Manager, doing forty things at once, fluttered past, and Christopher seized his coat-tail and arrested his progress. 'Fred,' he said grimly, 'hare out and 'phone for a squad of plain-clothes men. We've got barrackers in front.'

'Oh, Christ!' said the Stage Manager, and vanished.

Lottie appeared at the side of the stage, gasping in skin-tight white sequins, and caught the tail end of it.

'Wassat?' she demanded, stunned.

'Look through there,' said Christopher curtly. 'First two rows of the gallery. Hey, Syd! Get round to the Front of the House and tell 'em to start collecting policemen as hard as they can go! Barrackers in the gallery.'

'Yussur!' said Syd, and was gone as swiftly as the Stage Manager. Christopher turned and found Robin at his elbow. 'Get back to your dressing-room!' he said explosively. 'what the hell are you doing up here?'

'I want to see them,' said Robin, with strange calm. 'How many are there?'

'About thirty or forty up top. About another twenty downstairs.'

Lottie dragged herself away from the spy-hole, crimson in the face. 'The dirty heel! The lousy bum!'

she said feverishly. 'I'll get him jailed for this! Whaddya going to do, Chris? Whaddya going to do?'

'Shove the curtain up in two minutes.

'But you can't!' cried Lottie wildly. 'They'll bust the works! We're sunk! 'Phone the cops! *Do something!*'

'I've 'phoned the police. There's nothing else I can do, except ring up on time. Hey, Charlie, clear the stage!'

'Every one off stige!' trilled Charlie obediently. The small and frightened cluster of actors at the other end began moving off shakily.

Robin came away from the spy-hole with an expressionless face.

'But you *can't* ring up with a gang like that out front!' said Lottie incredulously. 'D'ya know what'll *happen*? I forbid it! Get that? This show don't go on! Go out front and tell 'em!'

'You get to your box and keep your mouth shut, you goddamned old fool!' said Christopher, with such fury that Lottie tottered before it and trod on her train. 'This show's going on if I have to sling the actors on to the stage! Get out of here, and stay out! House-lights!'

The Electrician piped an O.K. and set about his switches. The house lights went out slowly, and the orchestra leader skipped the last two pages of the overture. The audience's happy roar of chatter died down for a second as darkness fell upon them, but started up again almost immediately, taking on a defiant ring. The Stage Manager reported to Christopher, white and excited, with the news that Vine Street had refused plain-clothes men but were sending their available constables in about ten minutes. Christopher criticized the London police, took a last look round the stage, and signalled the curtain up. The Heroine's Mother sunk her fingers into the sofa that enthroned her and prayed to Henry Irving through parched lips. The Butler thought he felt cramp in the stomach coming on.

With a low, whistling sigh the curtain rose.

The audience quieted down mutinously, and cheated of their conversation, began coughing persistently instead.

The Heroine's Mother and the Butler waited with drawn breath for signs of life from the gallery. The gallery sat tight.

Hope returned to them.

The Heroine's Mother waited for a lull in the coughing and got her first line over. The Butler's reply was drowned by three late-comers in the stalls threading down a row of feet and saying how sorry they were, and then sitting in seats that had people in them already. In the wings Christopher and Robin stood with strained ears, and the stage-hands clustered behind, their shove-ha'penny and poker forgotten, which was without precedent. Robin was shivering, but when he touched his forehead it was a mass of little beads of sweat.

The Heroine made her entrance, and her husband and three friends of the family started a round of applause for her. Five more late-comers stumbled in and ploughed a furrow to their seats, stood while they took their coats off and bought programmes, and dropped a box of truffles. An old lady at the back of the Dress Circle began a fit of hiccups, and was carried out horizontally by two young men next to her, strangers to one another.

The critics and the barrackers sat silent and morose, staring trance-like into the infinite. The coughing went on monotonously.

Ada FitzGerald, having salvaged Diana from the dressing-room, had rushed her round to the front of the theatre, and they stood at the back of the pit. Directly in front of them sat the row of barrackers. One of the newspaper parcels was a little ajar. In it were eggs.

Life was picking up on the stage. The jokes were getting their laughs, and the Heroine's Mother received a round of applause on her first exit by deliberately playing for it. There were seven minutes to go to Robin's entrance.

'Christopher,' he said with sudden realization.

'They're waiting for me to go on,' and before any one could reply the world went crooked before his eyes and Christopher caught him as he toppled forward.

The Butler from on-stage saw it out of the corner of his eye, went clammy with fright, bungled a cue, and stood paralysed. The prompter hissed at him madly from the other side of the stage, the Heroine turned her back to the audience and worked her face at him in anger, and at last paraphrased his line for him and went on with the play, having said: 'You may go now, Briggs,' three times without budging the Butler an inch.

Christopher and the Stage Manager dragged Robin behind the bedroom screen from Act Two, emptied the rest of the brandy into him, and shook him roughly. Robin opened his eyes, looking at Christopher forgivingly, and closed them again.

'It's nearly his cue!' said the Stage Manager tearfully. 'Oh, God! Oh, God!'

'Robin!' said Christopher in an urgent undertone. 'Robin! You're on in two minutes! For God's sake wake up!' and shook him again. 'Here! help me get him on his feet!' They lifted him up and balanced him carefully.

Robin opened his eyes again and then stiffened himself and asked what had happened.

'You slipped and hit your head,' said Christopher rapidly, 'but you're all right now. They're waiting for you to go on. It's the last dress-rehearsal, so you don't have to force anything. Just take it easy. I'm going out front to see how it goes. Fred, take his arm!' They led him unhurriedly to his entrance. 'How do you feel?'

'All right,' said Robin in a steadier voice. 'Gosh, there's a smell of brandy somewhere.'

'Yea,' said Fred. 'It's me. Ready, old cock? Here comes yer cue.'

They stood back and watched him in painful suspense.

At the back of the pit, Diana clasped her hands together in agony. In the stalls the Middleton lit a cigarette and settled himself more comfortably. The

Butler opened the door and announced him, and Robin came quietly on to the stage. Silence from the audience. The Heroine shut her eyes and gritted her teeth, and the Butler shot back into the wings like an arrow from a bow.

‘This is the final dress-rehearsal,’ said Robin’s Inner Ego doggedly. ‘There’s no one out in front,’ and at this moment there was a smatter of applause, an ineffectual ‘give the kid a hand’ smatter that jerked Robin back to his senses with a rush.

The Heroine shot a frightened glance at the gallery; the applause petered out.

Robin heard himself say his first line, and then waited meekly for the riot.

Not a sound stirred the house. Not a cough, not the crackle of a chocolate box.

The Heroine lost her head and her cue. The gallery sat immobile.

The prompter’s voice broke the stillness, loud and clear as a bell. The Heroine started, said: ‘Er—ah, er—’ and gave a free rendering of her next speech. Robin returned it automatically with no conscious effort. His brain had fallen a lap behind, and the first he knew of his deeds was their effect on the Heroine. He was only conscious of waiting for the gallery to break out and scream him down. Subconsciously he did exactly what Christopher had told him to do, with a mechanical precision. Christopher’s personality, Christopher’s inflections, and Christopher’s slow, easy movements came over unhampered, and the gallery never made a sound.

Smoothly, without hitch or interruption (save for the British public’s cough, which nothing can be done about short of planting armed snipers in the stage boxes) the first act came to its close, and the curtain descended to unexcited but cordial applause. The moment it had touched the stage and bounced gently twice, the Heroine threw himself on to the sofa and had a fit of violent weeping. The Butler ran for his dressing-room and Gordon’s gin, and Christopher became conscious of

seven large and placid policemen and a sergeant standing unemotionally under the fire buckets, thoughtfully sucking the straps of their helmets.

The sergeant informed Christopher without rancour that they had been there twenty minutes, and where was the riot? When it was brought home to him that there hadn't been a riot, but that he was expected to go into the theatre and make fifty or sixty arrests on the offchance of nipping one in the bud, he grew touchy, and explained in an official voice that he wasn't empowered to arrest members of the public that had paid for their seats and were not causing a disturbance in a public place within the meaning of the Act. When a desperate and frenzied cast and staff had all but flung themselves at his feet and pleaded with him, he thought it over slowly and then softened, and said that he and his men would wait within easy earshot and, if the occasion arose, would quell any demonstration they considered unwarranted. The Stage Manager helped Robin down to his dressing-room, the tension abated a little, and the police all went outside into the street at the back of the theatre and walked up and down, thoughtfully sucking the straps of their helmets.

All this time the cultivated and critical London audience, not having noticed anything amiss, crushed themselves into the theatre bars, squeezed themselves into the foyers, and followed the press photographers grimly round the building, hoping to be mistaken for celebrities.

Now with the fall of the curtain, the hypnotic spell that had taken hold of Robin vanished with horrid speed, and the brandy at once came into its own and made him very drunk, which was why the Stage Manager had helped him down to his dressing-room.

As soon as Christopher was able to leave the Heroine to get over her hysterics alone he hurried on down to Robin's dressing-room and found him sitting with his head between his knees.

The Stage Manager looked up, pale and wan.

'I'm trying to tell him there's nothing more to worry about,' he said plaintively, 'but he won't listen!'

'What's the matter, old boy!' Christopher inquired sympathetically. 'You romped away with the first act, hands down! Good Lord, if you can keep it up you're made! If those sods in the gallery start anything, the police'll have 'em out in the street before you can say knife! There's nothing to worry about any longer. Buck up, Robin, you old chump! You're through the bad patch.'

Robin shook his head without lifting it off his knees.

'I'm not going on again,' he said with unshakable decision. 'I can't. You can do what you like. I'm not going on again. I'm finished.'

Christopher sat back on his heels and ran his fingers through his hair.

'God rot Middleton's entrails,' he said feelingly. 'What the hell can I do?' and at this minute Diana appeared in the door.

She was white and exhausted with the strain of the last half-hour, but her only thought at the moment was for Robin and as soon as she saw him crumpled up in the chair she ran across to him with a little cry and took him in her arms.

'Get him to go on,' was all Christopher said, and then jerked his head to the Stage Manager to follow him, and left them alone together.

In the passage he ran into Lottie head-on.

'I thought I told you to keep the hell out of here?' he exploded. 'What do you want to do? Kill the show while there's still time?'

'Look,' said Lottie urgently, and more shaken than he would have thought possible, 'I just wantcha to know I ain't in with Doug! Maybe there was a time when I wanted to see the kid flop, but not through a dirty trick like that! How's it they let the first act go by?'

'They're biding their time,' said Christopher flatly. 'Probably the last act. I've got police outside, ready for 'em.'

'Can I see the kid? I wanna 'apologize to him,'

Lottie pursued with a ring of sincerity. 'I feel mud!'

'You cannot,' said Christopher unmoved. 'You're going back to your box, and if you don't stay in the damned thing this time I'll have you locked in it!'

The warning bell began ringing in the front of the house, and the call boy's voice echoed down the passage. 'Sekkenack beginners, please! Sekkenack beginners!'

The seething mass in the theatre bars doubled their energies and began another round of drinks. The gallery and pit came meekly back to their seats. The stalls were still trying to be seen in the foyer. The gossip-writers, whimpering with writer's cramp, spattered their shorthand at double speed. The press photographers, severely mauled, fought their way to the Exits. The paid assassins sat immobile.

The second warning bell rang, and the theatre lights went down. The seething mass in the bars seethed on blissfully. Nothing short of storm troopers and mustard gas was sending them back to their seats before they chose to go. The foyer was still crammed with celebrities waiting to be recognized, angry now.

Christopher returned to Robin's dressing-room, knocked on the door, and then opened it and went in.

'We're just going up on the Second Act,' he said unhurriedly. 'O.K.?',

Robin looked at Diana and then at Christopher and nodded.

'That's the stuff,' said Christopher appreciatively.

'Here, let's get your make-up shipshape. It's showing signs of wear and tear! He picked up a stick of grease-paint and began repairs with a deft and practised hand.

Diana made an uncertain move towards the door, and he looked round quickly. 'Don't go, Diana. Make it easier if you watched from the wings along o' me. We need moral support. Shut your left eye a moment, Robin—O.K. There'll be no trouble from the front, this act. If they're going to do anything at all they'll wait till the last curtain and then try to shout down the applause.'

'Are you sure?' asked Robin with a flicker of hope.

'Certain. And they'll spend an uncomfortable night in Vine Street for their pains. Like another whack at the brandy before you go on?'

'No, thank you,' said Robin positively.

'Right,' said Christopher. 'Let's go.'

When they reached the wings the curtain had been up three minutes, and the stalls were just beginning to sort themselves out and get back to their seats. This time they were peppered with '*Shushes*' from the cheaper seats, which very rightly infuriated the stalls, who made more noise than ever to show their superiority and defiance.

. Now, the human soul can stand just so much, and no more. When it nears breaking-power it throws out a warning of some sort. If, however, the human soul has become numbed with suffering, it throws out a protection instead, and puts off the breaking-point till later.

This is very simple but very true, and what is more, works.

The Second Act went through with the smoothness of highly-tuned machinery, and not an actor on the stage knew what he was doing or why he was doing it from one moment to the next. This theft of their self-consciousness affected in its turn their restraint. They played with a fervour and robustness normally foreign to them. The play picked up speed. The last ten minutes of the act, which impressed the audience as well-drilled and cleverly-sustained suspense, was a desperate spurt to get the curtain down before the gallery changed its mind and got in first.

When the curtain fell, Everard Carter was heard to say '*My dear!*' with a touch of admiration in his voice, though he denied it later.

Back stage physical weariness was taking the place of high emotion. The strain was the same, but the resistance to it weaker. People moved about passively, mutely resigned to whatever the gallery held in store.

An overpowering desire to lie down and go to sleep descended on Robin, which Diana and Christopher wrestled with valiantly. Even so, when the curtain rose on the Third Act he was all but indifferent to his fate from drowsiness.

In the third act the young composer was called upon to play the piano to the Other Woman, which was done very neatly with the help of the pianist from the orchestra off-stage. As it drew near there was a sudden tightening of the atmosphere, a new tenseness, a pall of demoniac anticipation.

'This is where it comes,' said Christopher between his teeth, and felt Diana's hand tighten nervously on his sleeve.

Robin sat down at the piano, and to all intents and purposes played an original composition on it.

As the last notes were lingering away there was a sudden metallic clink on the stage. He and the Other Woman looked round with leaping nerves.

A penny rolled slowly and deliberately across the stage and then clattered into the footlights.

For a moment there was a dead silence in the theatre, and then an embarrassed giggle from the stalls.

Robin sat where he was, unable to move, and the Other Woman ran her hand unsteadily across her forehead.

'Get on with it!' hissed Christopher furiously.

In a dream the Other Woman recited her next cue.

'That wasn't very clever,' she said, terrified at the new significance the words had taken on.

'Orright! Let's 'ear yer do better then!' called a voice from the gallery, and there was a loud guffaw from its first two rows.

The stalls, who had been on the verge of giggling again, now craned their necks up resentfully. A con-
signment of '*Shushes*' from the dress circle went unheeded. A new, strong anger flowed into Robin.

He stood up, banged the lid of the piano shut, and plunged into the scene with the Other Woman. After

two lines of it the laughter had subsided enough for his voice to be heard. There was a new quality to it, an unexpected light of battle in his eyes.

His next line rang out into the theatre.

'If you've no belief in my music,' he said clearly, 'how the hell can you believe in me?'

'That's pooped yer!' sang the voice from the gallery triumphantly, and broke into ironic applause. The first two rows took it up, and cheered hoarsely. The stalls began to look uneasy, and there were brave cries of '*Hush!*' from the dress circle.

'Get those goddam cops!' said Christopher to the Stage Manager urgently, 'and rush them up to the gallery! It's here!'

The Other Woman, game to the last, returned his cue, but not even Robin could hear her above the din of the gallery, now supplemented by the back row of the pit. They were clapping with the horrible rhythm of the barracker's clap: two slow, three quick, two slow, three quick. It was useless to hold out against it. The Other Woman gave a sob of agony and turned to the wings. 'The curtain! Put the curtain down!' she wailed.

Robin's anger suddenly broke loose. 'Leave the curtain alone!' he shouted, and then charged resolutely down the stage to the footlights.

'Speech! Speech!' cried the gallery. 'Ooray! Boo!'

Robin stood and waited, without moving. The gallery showed no signs of stopping. Then he took a deep breath and shouted: '*Shut up!*' at the top of his lungs.

It took the gallery so much by surprise that it subsided in spite of itself and in the pause it took to reorganize a fresh outburst Robin seized his opening.

'If I give you my word,' he said clearly, 'that this play will never be seen again after to-night, which is what you seem to want, may we be allowed to finish it just once? There's only a very little more.'

The barrackers, whose only orders had been to stop

the show, sat puzzled at this unexpected appeal, temporarily at a loss; but the rest of the house was thrilled to the marrow. With one accord the dress circle rose and cheered him, and the stalls burst into spontaneous applause.

With a sudden sickening jolt the Middleton realized that his plans had gone agley, and that it was a matter of seconds before they failed utterly. The barrackers, under the sway of the enthusiasm, faltered and were dumb. The police were on their way up the gallery stairs. With the recklessness of desperation the Middleton leaped to his feet with the blood singing in his ears.

'Kept boy!' he shouted wildly. 'Kept boy!'

At the voice of their leader vitality returned to his forces. There was an overwhelming roar of boos and cat-calls from the gallery. To Robin, helpless against a mass, the Middleton's voice brought lightning animation. He took a little run, cleared the footlights and orchestra pit in one bound, landed on his feet in the centre aisle, pelted up it, and flung himself bodily on to the Middleton; who toppled over the back of the seat under his weight, fighting madly. A shower of vegetables and eggs came down from the gallery, a free fight broke out at the back of the pit between the barrackers and the attendants, shrill screams rent the air, the police arrived in the gallery (where war was raging in real earnest) and pandemonium broke loose.

Those nearest Robin and the Middleton scrambled out of range of the flying fists, shouting inanely for help, and the Exit doors were suddenly jammed tight.

Under cover of the raging chaos and deafening uproar an unsuccessful playwright banged two critics' heads together and kicked a third in the bottom as he scrambled for his hat.

Garstin made a half-hearted attempt to rescue the Middleton, received a stray blow in the ear, and tottered back dizzily into the lap of an elderly lady novelist. Fresh contingents of police arrived and pushed their way in through the Exits. The stage was packed with actors, electricians, scene-shifters and dressers. They stood,

huddled together and motionless, and watched. Christopher, who had tried to make his way through the pass-door to the stalls, found himself rammed against the wall by a seething mass of cultivated and critical London audience screaming for help. He put his head down, thrust out his elbows and burrowed his way, through them, and at last, by pure determination, came out into the centre of the stalls in time to see Robin's final blow eliminate the Middleton. The next second Garstin, with a belated rush of courage, struck Robin across the back of his neck from behind, and he crumpled forward on his face.

With a bellow of rage Christopher vaulted three rows of stalls, seized Garstin by the scalp as he turned to flee and flung him headlong down the aisle. Then he knelt on his stomach and banged his head on the floor until Garstin was no longer interested.

Up in the gallery the police, helped by disinterested spectators, were winning. The barrackers at the back of the pit had fled ignominiously, leaving a trail of eggshells and burst tomatoes in their wake. The police were busy arresting the entire cultivated and critical London audience, who were in too deep a stupor to protest. Order was returning again.

Christopher dragged Robin out from under Row H, picked him up in his arms, and waded down to the orchestra pit. The Butler and the Stage Manager leant out across the footlights and dragged them up on to the stage.

Robin opened one eye as they laid him down on the sofa.

'You all right?' asked Christopher anxiously.

There was a pause, and then Robin moved slightly.

'Did I make his nose bleed?' he asked faintly.

'You half killed him.'

A gentle smile stole over Robin's face.

The Stage Manager shook him gently and then looked up.

'Oat like a candle,' he said sympathetically.

§

Outside in Ebury Street the rain was falling in a solid mass. The first thing Robin saw was the water streaming down the window. He turned his head and a pang shot through his body. Diana's hand fell softly on his forehead at once.

'You mustn't move your head,' she said, and kissed his cheek. 'Poor darling—does it hurt terribly?'

'No,' said Robin, and thought for a minute. 'How did I get it?'

'I shouldn't worry about it, just for a while. Try to get to sleep again.'

'But I'm hungry,' said Robin mildly.

'I'll bring ye something up reet away,' promised Miss Abernethy from the door. 'Would tu boiled eggs, tea, an' toost do? We *have* kippers,' she added generously, 'but I'm thinking they'd no agree wi' your stomach.'

Robin assured her the eggs would do just as well, and she departed forthwith.

Eggs.

It struck a familiar chord in his memory.

With a sudden rush the night before came back in all its nightmarish potency. He lay staring at the window, holding Diana's hand tightly against his breast.

The terrible, horrible, failure.

The penny that had been thrown on to the stage. Kept boy—kept boy. He would have to leave London that day. Unless he was arrested. Failure, failure, horrible failure. He heard the bellow of laughter from the gallery that had followed the first sally, and it curdled his blood anew. His mind flew back to the Middleton, insane with hatred, standing up in the stalls and shrieking at him. And the fight. None of it was real. It was all slap-stick comedy. All except the fact that he was a failure, and would have to go home, after wasting nearly a year of his father's money. *Failure, failure ; horrible failure.* He had even lost Diana.

He looked up at her, and she gave a little, half-nervous smile of reassurance.

'I've made a mess of things, haven't I?' he said slowly. 'About us, I mean.'

For answer she leant forward and rested her cheek beside his, and he put his arms around her.

'I'll always love you,' said Diana softly. 'I'll wait all the rest of my life if I have to.'

There was a sound of labouring feet on the stairs, and then a sharp rat-tat on the door. Robin gave a wriggle of resentment, and Diana went over and opened it.

Miss Abernethy came in with a tray and two newspapers under her arm, and her eye was bright.

'Number Five,' she said in a voice that trembled with excitement, 'has just given me the morning peppers. Also there are five reporters in the sitting-room, one a wumman, tae see ye.' She spread out the first of the papers. 'You're on the front page, Mr. Gardner! Fancy ye no telling me a *wurrd* about it! Why, you're a regular heero!'

Robin picked up the paper blankly.

His name in large capitals leaped out and confronted him. Sensational riot—without precedent in the theatre—Actor-Playwright leaps footlights—fight in stall—Young hero of the hour—Robin Gardner. . . . Success—success. . . .

'What shall I tell the reporters in the sitting-room?' asked Miss Abernethy.

'Ask them to wait until Mr. Lovell arrives,' said Robin weakly; 'and, Miss Abernethy, could you very quickly 'phone Mr. Lovell to come here at once?'

This is the end of the story. At four o'clock that afternoon the gallery queue had stretched half-way down the side of the theatre. The stalls were booked out by six-thirty. The advance booking poured in as fast as the Box Office could answer the 'phone. *Soft Laughter* ran for three weeks to capacity.

Then Huddersfield beat Arsenal, and public interest flowed into other more important channels. In the heat of the moment, however, an excitable film company signed Robin for two years at fifty pounds a week.

When *Soft Laughter* eventually closed after a three and a half months' run, and Lottie had gone back to America, Robin and Diana announced their engagement, though they weren't married till late last autumn.

I have told my story in my own quiet way, as threatened, and though I cannot dedicate this book openly to Diana, because she won't let me use her real name, I dedicate it to her just the same.

And though I know she is happy with Robin, I hope she won't entirely forget that once there was some one who never quite got anywhere, and whose name was Christopher Lovell, who loved her.

And still loves her.

Not that it matters.

